

FROM THE EDITORS OF ROD SERLING'S THE

Twilight Zone™ MAGAZINE

# NIGHT CRY™

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SUMMER 1987

\$2.95 US  
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F. PAUL WILSON  
**TRAPS**

JOHN SKIPP AND  
CRAIG SPECTOR  
a lost chapter from

**THE  
CLEANUP**

And more tales of  
unearthly horror—  
J. N. WILLIAMSON  
LEWIS SHINER  
TOM DISCH  
REGINALD BRETNOR  
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THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

Vol. 2, No. 4  
Summer 1987

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Cover,  
back cover  
illustration, and  
all interior art by  
J. K. Potter

*Night Cry*, Summer, 1987, Volume 2, Number 4, is published quarterly (4 times per year) in the United States and simultaneously in Canada by TZ Publications, a division of Montcalm Publishing Corporation, 800 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. Telephone (212) 986-9600. Copyright © 1987 by TZ Publications. *Night Cry* is published pursuant to a license from Carolyn Serling and Viacom Enterprises, a division of Viacom International, Inc. All rights reserved. Return postage must accompany all unsolicited material. The publisher assumes no responsibility for care and return of unsolicited materials. All rights reserved on material accepted for publication unless otherwise specified. All letters sent to *Night Cry* or to its editors are assumed intended for publication. Nothing may be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from the publishers. Any similarity between persons appearing in fiction and real persons living or dead is coincidental. Single copies \$2.95 in U.S., \$3.50 in Canada. Printed in U.S.A.

With the exception of "John Mortonson's Funeral" and "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot" by Ambrose Bierce, all stories in this issue of *Night Cry* are new and appear in these pages for the first time anywhere.

# † CLIVE BARKER †

"If I see a wall, I run at it with my head. I have the instincts of a rhinoceros. Anywhere I feel like an idea or an attitude has not been explored as fully as it possibly can be . . . I will have a go at (it)."

"I suppose I'm impatient with reality . . . There is a certain sense in which we're all knocking our heads against the wall saying: crack a little, damn you crack. And if you won't crack in reality . . . in the lives we live, then we'll make you crack in the fiction we read and write."



"I like very visual horror because that's what I see with my mind's eye. When the monster comes to get the characters, I see everything, and it would be very mean-spirited of me not to write that down."

Ramsey Campbell and Alan Moore also speak their minds in *American Fantasy*'s special British Invasion issue with an update of Who's Who in the British horror scene by R. Hadji.

We celebrate Andre Norton's 75th birthday with an interview plus an overview of her career.

*Movie Preview: Hellraiser.  
Fiction: Mercedes Lackey  
& W.T. Lowe.*

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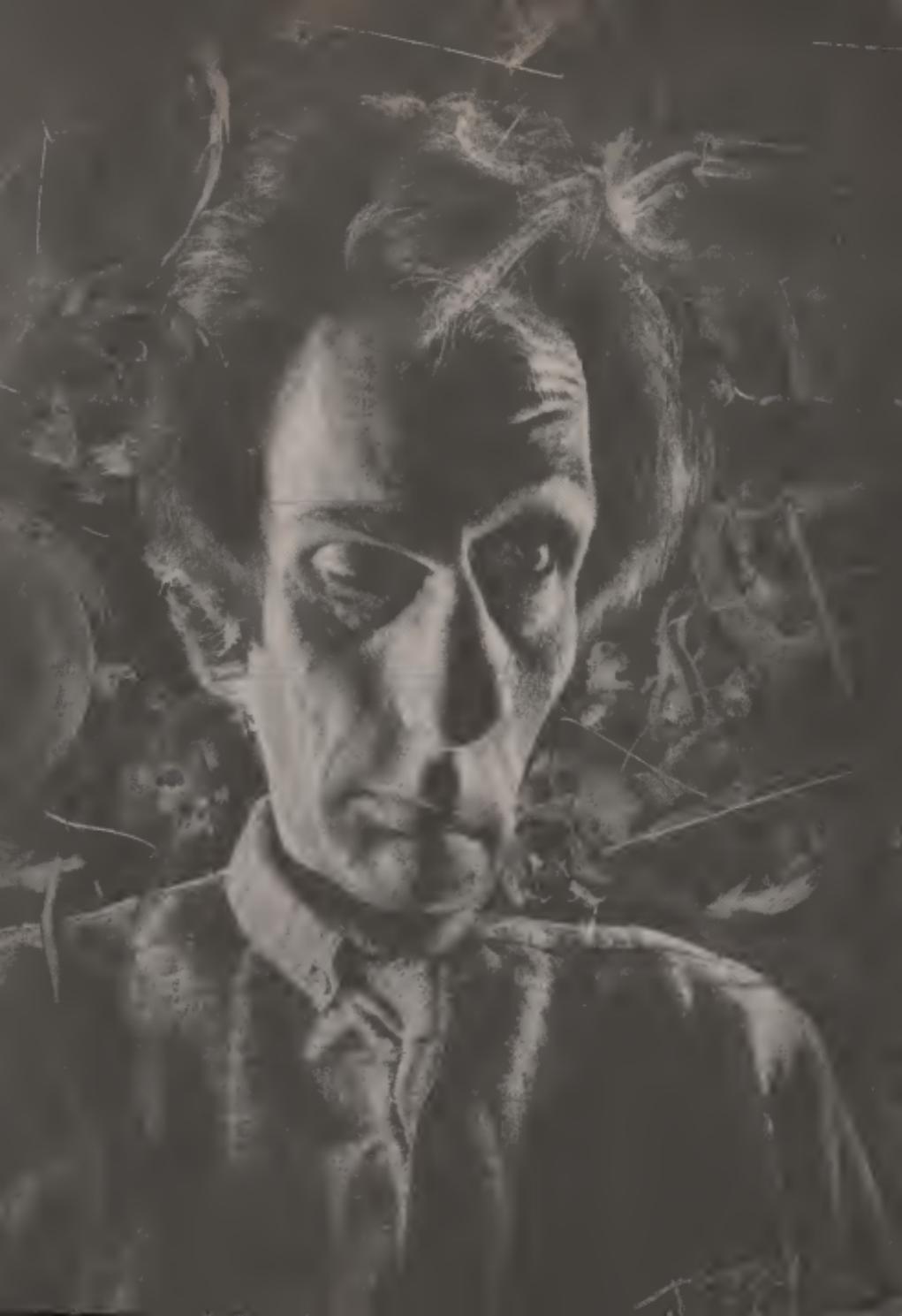
# Introduction: The Keeper of the Night

After Meeting  
Mr. Rodgers.

He seems at first an unlikely candidate for this harsh and unforgiving office: a compact, substantial young man with merry blue eyes and blond, curling whiskers, attired with an almost Dickensian clerkishness. But the initial appearance is deceiving. From his rolled sleeves thrust massive arms and hands, made strong from wrestling things darker than most of us have encountered. And those twinkling eyes hold the look of a man used to commanding demons.

He is the warden of our nightmares, the guardian of our darkest dreams. The bright, burnished sun of daytime drives away our fears, sends them into flight to the shadows under dumpsters, the dark velvet carpeting under fine oak desks, the secret places of our hearts, the corners of a loved one's eyes. At night they cry to be free.

We send them to him in our sleep, and in our waking dreams; those trembling visions we dare not acknowledge, folding and clipping them into manila prisons, closed with brass clasps like the Seal of Solomon. In the wan light of early morning, the Keeper of the night sits surrounded by them. On the dreamshelves behind him crespuscular things cringe back from the glare, curling around their darkness like sled dogs harboring their heat in snow. Now



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and again a tendril of the dark will uncurl itself, rather more than a mere shadow, and reach tentatively for him.

With a bright steel blade, he slits open our most closely held terrors, the ones dearer to us, almost, than our joys. He has seen them all. There is no passage of this midnight mansion he has not traveled. No torment we can show him is beyond his ken, no evil wholly unfamiliar.

He weighs each dream on his well-balanced scale, knowing almost at a glance which is still half-formed, and which full-grown, like some seasoned fisherman who knows the length of his catch by the scars on his hands. And when, at last, the winnowing is done, he gathers them together, lines them up before him, pacing them as a lion tamer does his cats, to make from our most abject fears a kind of circus of the night. He makes the shadows dance with the tip of his pen, holds them in check with a well-placed laugh, transmutes the unspeakable into the sublime.

His realm is the land of things-not-as-they-seem. Here we might find a green and growing thing become blighted and black, a bottle filled with spirits of a darker kind, a man so filled with good that he has become a kind of evil. Or perhaps a house where the scuttling things in the attic are more than vermin, a theatre where ghosts cannot rest, or a grave where the dead lie uneasy. It's a world where time can be twisted, where friends become enemies, where our own senses can betray us. In this bleak, forsaken land, the Keeper of the Night is all that stands between us and madness.

And when, at last, his long day is done, as the shadows have begun to lengthen, he stacks his work neatly to hand, dons his coat and hat, and walks to the door. He surveys the ranks of bridled dreams, bids them heel with a half-breathed word, and turns out the light.

Sometimes I imagine him traveling home to his modest flat, his head filled with the horrors he's seen. The commuters who travel with him, if they notice him at all, must mark him as the sort of stalwart bureaucrat who holds the world together. Their eyes pass over him, never suspecting the hellish world over which he *does* preside. For if they did, they might wonder as I do: When the Keeper of the Night turns out his light, what monstrous shapes despoil *his* slumber?

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# TRAPS

by F. PAUL WILSON

There was nothing to worry about.  
After all, where was the danger  
in setting out a trap  
for a mouse?

**S**kippy Super Chunk peanut butter was the best bait. Hank smeared it on the pedals of the four traps he'd bought. They were Victors. Something about the way the big red V in their logo formed itself around the shape of a mouse's head gave him a feeling that they knew what they were about.

Not that he took any pleasure in killing mice. He may not have had the bumper sticker, but he most certainly did brake for animals. He didn't like killing anything. Even ants. Live and let live was fine with him, but he drew the line at the threshhold of his house. They could live long and prosper out *there*, he would live in *here*. When they came inside, it was war.

Hed had a few in the basement of their last house and caught them all with Skippy-baited Victors. But he always felt guilty when he found one of the little things dead in the trap, so frail and harmless-looking with its white underbelly and little pink feet and tail. The eyes were always the worst—shiny black and guileless, wide open and looking at him, almost saying, *Why? I don't eat much.*

Hank knew he could be a real sentimental jerk at times.

He consoled himself with the knowledge that the mouse didn't feel any pain in the trap. Better than those warfarin poisons where they crawl off to their nest and slowly bleed to death. With a trap, the instant the nibbling mouse disturbs the baited pedal, *wham!* the bow snaps down and breaks its neck. It's on its way to mouse



heaven before it knows what hit it.

Hank was doing this on the sly. Gloria wouldn't be able to sleep a wink if she thought there were mice overhead in the ceiling. And the twins, God, they'd want to catch them and make them pets and give them names. With the trip to Disney World just three days off, all they could talk about was Mickey and Minnie. They'd never forgive him for killing a mouse. Best to set the traps before they came home in the afternoon and dispose of the little carcasses in the morning after everyone was gone. Luckily, this was his slack season and he had some time at home to take care of it.

He wondered how the mice were getting in. He knew they were up there because he'd heard them last night. Something had awakened him at about two thirty this morning—a noise, a bad dream, he didn't remember what—and as he was lying there spooned against Gloria he heard little claws scraping on the other side of the ceiling. It sounded like two or three of them under the insulation, clawing on the plasterboard, making themselves a winter home. He was ticked. This was a brand new two-story colonial, just built, barely lived in for six months, and already they had uninvited guests. And in the attic no less.

Well, they were in a woodsy area and it was fall, the time of year when woodsy things start looking for winter quarters. He wished them all a safe and warm winter. But not in this house.

Before setting the traps, he fitted a bolt on the attic door. The house had one of those swing-down attic doors in the hall ceiling right outside their bedroom. It had a pull-cord on this side and a folding ladder on the upper side. The twins had been fascinated with it since they moved in. The attic had always been off-limits to them, but you never knew. He had visions of one of them pulling the ladder down, climbing up there, and touching one of the traps. Instant broken finger. So he screwed a little sliding bolt in place to head off that trauma at the pass.

He took the four traps up to the attic and gingerly set the bows. As he stood on the ladder and spaced them out on the particle board flooring around the opening, he noticed an odd odor. The few times he had been up here before the attic had been filled with the clean smell of plywood and kiln-dried fir studs. Now there was a sour tint to the air. Vaguely unpleasant. Mouse BO? He didn't know. He just knew that something about it didn't sit well with him.

He returned to the second floor, bolted the ceiling door closed,

and hit the switch that turned off the attic light. Everything was set, and well before Gloria and the girls got home.

Kate crawled onto Hank's lap as he leaned back in the recliner and watched the six o'clock *Eyewitness News*.

"Let's read Mickey's book," she said.

That was all Kim had to hear. She ran in from the kitchen like a shot.

"Me too! Me too!"

"Just three days and we'll be in Disney World!" Hank said.

So with his two pale blonde seven-year-old darlings snuggled up against him, Hank opened up "Mickey's book" for the nightly ritual of the past two weeks. Not a book actually, just a brochure touting all the park's attractions. But it had become a Holy Book of sorts for the twins and they never tired of paging through it. This had to be their twentieth guided tour in as many days and their blue eyes were just as wide and full of wonder this time as the first.

Hank had come to see Disney World as a religious experience for seven-year-olds. Moslems had Mecca, Catholics had the Vatican, Japanese had Mount Fuji. Kids had Disney World on the East Coast and Disneyland on the West. Katie and Kim would start out on their first pilgrimage Thanksgiving morning.

He hugged them closer, absorbing their excitement. This was what life was all about. And he was determined to show them the best time of their lives. The sky was the limit. Any ride, any attraction, he didn't care how many times they wanted to go on it, he'd take them. Four days of fantasy at Mickey's Place with no real-world intrusions. No *Time*, no *Daily News*, no *Eyewitness Special Reports*, no background noise about wars or floods or muggings or bombings or mousetraps.

*Nothing* about mousetraps.

The snap of the trap woke Hank with a start. It was faint, muffled by the intervening plasterboard and insulation. He must have been subconsciously attuned to it, because he heard it and Gloria didn't.

He checked the clock—twelve forty-two—and tried to go back to sleep. Hopefully, that was the end of that.

He was just dozing back off when a second trap sprang with a muffled snap. Two of them. Sounded like he had a popular

attic.

He didn't know when he got to sleep again. It took a while.

When Hank had the house to himself again the next morning, he pulled down the ceiling door and unfolded the ladder. Half way up, he hesitated. This wasn't going to be pleasant. He knew when he stuck his head up through that opening he'd be eye-level with the attic floor—and with the dead mice. Those shiny reproachful little black eyes ...

He took a deep breath and stepped up a couple of rungs.

Yes, two of the traps had been sprung and two sets of little black eyes were staring at him. Eyes and little else. At first he thought it was a trick of the light, of the angle, but as he hurried the rest of the way up, he saw it was true.

The heads were still in the traps, but the bodies were gone. Little bits of grey fur were scattered here and there, but that was it. Sort of gave him the creeps. Something had eaten the dead mice. Something bigger than a mouse. A disconcerting thought.

And that odor was worse. He still couldn't identify it, but it was taking on a stomach-turning quality.

He decided it was time for an inspection tour of the grounds. His home was being invaded. He wanted to know how. He found the little buggers' route of invasion on the south side of the house. He had two heating-cooling zones inside, with one unit in the basement and one in the attic. The compressor-blowers for both were outside on the south side. The hoses to the upstairs unit ran up the side of the house to the attic through an aluminum leader.

That was how they were getting in.

There wasn't much space in the leader, but a mouse can squeeze through the tiniest opening. The rule of thumb—as all mouse experts knew—was that if it can get its head through, the rest of the body can follow. They were crawling into the leader, climbing up along the hoses inside, and following them into the attic. Simple.

But what had eaten them?

Up above the spot where the hoses ran through the siding, he noticed the triangular gable vent hanging free on its right side. Something had pulled it loose. As he watched, a squirrel poked its head out, looked at him, then scurried up onto the roof. It ran a few feet along the edge, jumped onto an overhanging oak branch, and disappeared into the reddening leaves.

Great! He was collecting a regular menagerie up there!

So much for the joys of a wooded lot. Gloria and he had chosen this semi-rural development because they liked the seclusion of an acre lot and the safety for the twins of living on a cul-de-sac. They both had grown up in New Jersey, and Tom's River seemed like as good a place as any to raise kids. The house was expensive but they were a two-income family—she a teacher and he a CPA—so they went for it.

So far, theirs was the only house completed in this section, although two new foundations had just been started. It would be nice to have neighbors. Until recently, the only other building in sight had been a deserted stone church of unknown age and long-forgotten denomination a few hundred yards south of here. The belfry of that old building had concerned him for a while—bats, you know. Very high rabies rate. But he spoke to the workmen when they bulldozed it down last week to start another cul-de-sac, and they told him they hadn't seen a single bat. Lots of animal droppings up there, but no bats.

He wondered: would a squirrel eat a couple of dead mice? He thought they only ate nuts and berries. Maybe this one was a carnivore. Didn't matter. One way or another, something had to be done about that gable vent. He went to get the ladder.

**H**e had everything taken care of by the time Gloria and the girls got home from their respective schools.

He'd tacked the gable vent back into place. He couldn't see how that squirrel had pulled it free, but it wouldn't get it out now. He also plugged up the upper and lower ends of the hose leader with an aerosol foam insulation he picked up at Rickel's. It occurred to him as he watched the mustard-color gunk harden into a solid styrofoam plug that he was cutting off the mouse exit as well as the mouse 'entryway. Hopefully they were all out for the day. When they came back they'd be locked out and would have to go somewhere else. And even more hopefully, the squirrel hadn't left a friend in the attic behind the resecured gable vent.

**H**ank slept hardly at all that night. He kept listening for the snap of a trap, hoping he wouldn't hear it, yet waiting for it. Hours passed. The last time he remembered seeing on the clock radio LED was three thirty-four. He must have fallen asleep after that.

Dawn was just starting to bleach out the night when the snap

came. He came wide awake with the sound. The clock said five ten. But the noise didn't end with that single snap. Whatever was up there began to thrash. He could hear the wooden base of the trap slapping against the attic flooring. Something bigger than a mouse, maybe a squirrel, was caught but still alive. He heard another snap and a squeal of pain. God, it was alive and hurt! His stomach turned.

Gloria rolled over, a silhouette in the growing light.

"Djoo hear somin?" she mumbled, still nine-tenths asleep.

Suddenly the attic went still.

"Nothing," he said. "Some animals fighting outside. Go back to sleep."

She did. He couldn't.

**H**e approached the attic door with dread. He did *not* want to go up there. What if it was still alive? What if it was weak and paralyzed but still breathing? He'd have to kill it. He didn't know if he could do that. But he'd have to. It would be the only humane thing to do. How? Drown it? Smother it in a plastic bag? He began to sweat.

This was crazy. He was wimping out over a rodent in his attic. Enough already! He flipped the attic light switch, slipped the bolt, and pulled on the cord. The door angled down on its hinges.

But it didn't come down alone. Something came with it, flying right at his face.

He yelled like a fool in a funhouse and batted it away. Then he saw what it was: one of the mousetraps. At first glance it looked empty, but when he went to pick it up, he saw what was in it and almost tossed his cookies.

A furry little forearm, no longer than the last two bones on his pinky finger, was caught under the bow. It looked like it once might have been attached to a squirrel, but now it ended in a ragged bloody stump where it had been chewed off just below the shoulder.

Where the hell was the rest of it?

Visions of the squirrel chewing off its own arm swam around him until he remembered that auto-amputation only occurred with arresting traps, the kind that were chained down. Animals had been known to chew off a limb to escape those. The squirrel could have dragged the mousetrap with it.

But it hadn't.

Hank stood at the halfway point on those steps a long while. He finally decided he had wasted enough time. He clenched his teeth, told himself it was dead, and poked his head up. He started and almost fell off the stairs when he turned his head and found the squirrel's tail only two inches from his nose. It was caught in the bow of another trap—the second snap he had heard this morning. But there was no body attached.

Nope. Something had eaten it. Something that didn't smell too good, because the attic was really beginning to stink.

He ducked down the ladder, grabbed the flashlight he always kept in the night table, then hurried back up to the attic. The light from the single bulb over the opening in the floor didn't reach very far. And even with daylight filtering in through the gable vents, there were lots of dark spots. He wanted the flashlight so he could get a good look along the inside of the eaves and into all the corners.

He searched carefully, and as he moved through the attic he had a vague sense of another presence, a faint awareness of something else here, a tantalizing hint of furtive movement just out of his range of vision.

He shook it off. The closeness up here, the poor lighting, the missing animal carcasses—it had all set his imagination in motion. He gave the attic a thorough going over and found nothing but a few droppings. Big droppings. Bigger than something a mouse or squirrel would leave. Maybe possum-sized. Or raccoon-sized.

Was that the answer? A possum or a coon? He didn't know much about them, but he'd seen them around in the woods, and he knew every time he put turkey or chicken scraps in the garbage, something would get the lid off the trash can and tear the Hefty bag apart until every last piece of meat was gone. Raccoons were notorious for that. If they'd eat leftover chicken, why not dead mice and squirrels.

Made sense to him. But how was it getting in? A check of the gable vent he'd resecured yesterday gave him the answer. It had been pulled free again. Well, he'd fix that right now.

He went down to his workshop and got a hammer and some heavy nails. He felt pretty good as he pounded them into the edges of the vent, securing it from the *inside*. He knew what he was up against now, and knew something that big would be easy to keep out. No raccoon or possum was going to pull this vent free again. And just to be sure, he went over to the north side and

reinforced the gable vent there.

That was it. His house was his own again.

Wednesday night was chaotic. Excitement was at a fever pitch with the twins packing their own little suitcases full of stuffed animals and placing them by the front door so they'd be all set to go first thing in the morning.

Hank helped Gloria with the final packing of the big suitcases and they both fell into bed around midnight. He had little trouble getting off to sleep. There probably weren't any mice left, there weren't any squirrels, and he was sure no raccoon or possum was getting in tonight. So why stay awake listening?

The snap of a trap woke him around three thirty. No thrashing, no slapping, just the snap. Another mouse. A second trap went off ten minutes later. Then a third. *Damn!* He waited. The fourth and final trap sprang at four a.m.

Hank lay tense and rigid in bed and wondered what to do. Everybody would be up at first light, just a couple of hours from now, getting ready for the drive to Newark Airport. He couldn't leave those mouse carcasses up there all the time they were away — they'd rot and the whole house would be stinking by the time they got back.

He slipped out of bed and grabbed the flashlight.

"What's wrong?" Gloria asked, awakened by the movement.

"Just getting some water," he whispered.

She rolled over and he closed the bedroom door behind him. He didn't waste any time. He had to get up there and get rid of the dead mice before the girls woke up. These damn animals were really getting on his nerves. He pulled the door down and hurried up.

Hank stood on the ladder and gaped at the traps. All four had been sprung but lay empty on the flooring around him, the peanut butter untouched. No mice heads, no bits of fur. What could have tripped them without getting caught? It was almost like a game.

He looked around warily. He was standing in a narrow cone of light. The rest of the attic was dark. Very dark. The sense of something else up here with him was very strong now. So was the odor. It was worse than ever.

Imagination again.

He waved the flashlight around quickly but saw no scurrying or lurking shapes along the eaves or in the corners. He made a

second sweep, more slowly this time, more careful. He crouched and moved all along the edges, bumping his head now and again on a rafter, his flashlight held ahead of him like a gun.

Finally, when he was satisfied nothing of any size was lurking about, he checked the gable vent.

It had been yanked loose again. Some of the nails had pulled free, and those that hadn't had ripped through the vent's plastic edge.

He was uneasy now. No raccoon was strong enough to do this. He didn't know many *men* who could do it without a crowbar. This was getting out of hand. He suddenly wanted to get downstairs and bolt the attic door behind him. He'd call a professional exterminator as soon as they got back from Orlando.

He spun about, sure that something had moved behind him, but all was still, all was dark but for the pool of light under the bulb. Yet ...

Quickly now, he headed back toward the light, toward the ladder, toward the empty traps. As he sidled along, he checked in the corners and along the eaves one last time, and wondered how and why the traps had been sprung. He saw nothing. Whatever it was, if it had come in, it wasn't here anymore. Maybe the attic light had scared it off. If that was the case, he'd leave the light on all night. All week.

His big mistake was looking for it along the floor.

It got him as he came around the heating unit. He saw a flash movement as it swung down from the rafters—big as a rottweiler, brown scruffy fur, a face that was all mouth with huge countless teeth, four clawed arms extended toward him as it held onto the beams above with still two more limbs—and that was all. It engulfed his head and lifted him off the floor in one sweeping motion. For a few spasming seconds his fingers tore futilely at its matted fur and his legs kicked and writhed silently in the air. As life and consciousness fled that foul smothering unbearable agony, he sensed the bottomless pit of its hunger and thought helplessly of the open attic door, of the ladder going down, and of Gloria and the twins sleeping below.

# THE CLEANUP

by JOHN SKIPP  
and CRAIG SPECTOR

Billy Rowe didn't *need* to get stoned.  
He was getting off on the Power.

A *Night Cry* exclusive: the lost chapter from the bestselling novel *The Cleanup*, on sale now from Bantam Books.

**O**ne down  
*So many more to go . . .*

After bidding adeiu to the sad remains of K-K-Kennan W-Wyeth, Billy Rowe moved deeper into the darkness at a leisurely pace. Central Park, by and large, was so peaceful at night, with the walkways empty and the transverse traffic thinned to nearly nothing. Dull moonlight shone on his pale forehead, the shoulders of his black leather jacket as he wandered past the Wollman Rink, which had been a construction site for as long as he could remember. Benches lined the path in an unbroken chain of vacancies.

So he was surprised to notice the four black dudes, getting stoned at the base of the rock outcropping ahead. They were surprised to see him, too. It took most of thirty seconds for them to get their *good smoke, good sens, thai stick* rap together. "No, thank you man," he said, smiling. One of them smiled back. Then they left him alone, and vice versa.

He didn't need to get stoned. He was getting off on the Power.

And it was nice to know that he didn't need to kill *everybody* he met in the park tonight.



There were stairs leading up and around, bypassing the rocks, No vay, José. He went straight for the outcropping and started to climb, feeling like a six-year-old at soldier play. A toehold here. A handle there. It was a piece of cake, but that was okay. It was the sense of play he was after.

Billy came up at the top, noted with alarm how close he was to the East Drive, and ducked back down. NO ADMITTANCE AFTER DARK the signs all said. A few cars were driving by, including two taxis and a cop. Nobody stopped, nobody slowed. He kept down anyway, sidling along the side of the rocks instead of clamboring up on top. More exciting that way, anyhoo.

To his left, the Dairy came into view. It was a quaint old structure that doubled as the park's information center. Billy flashed on the classic old Elmer Fudd hunting song, giggled, and broke into his best Fuddian impression:

A-hunting we wiw go,  
A-hunting we wiw go,  
    Hi-ho, a-daiwy-o,  
A-hunting we wiw go.

He followed with the patented Elmer Fudd machinegun o'laughter, smiled crazily as he jumped off the rocks and moved deeper into the park. Slinking through the grass, he saw no one and no one saw him. For the moment, no traffic moved on the 65th Street Trasverse. He crossed it easily and started up the Mall at a brisk but unhurried pace.

Along the way, he passed Christopher Columbus, William Shakespeare, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and Fitz Green Halleck, whoever the fuck *that* was. All of them were displaying the benefits of acid rain on statues; the aptly named Mr. Burns, in particular, was staring to resemble the Rick Baker makeup in *The Incredible Melting Man*.

He also passed a couple of bums, passed out on the benches that lined the Mall. He left them alone, for better or worse. The Power could give them a temporary patch-up job on the holes in their souls, no doubt about it. But it seemed to make sense that if you didn't change the context in which they lived, healing their insides did only marginal good; the world would just beat them back down again. He wasn't ready to truly help them, just yet. He let them sleep. God knew they needed it.

During the day, the long, wide pedestrian corridor of the Mall

was full of dancing roller-skaters and lunchtime escapist. At night, with the moon shining reticently down, it resembled the dreamland cathedral through which he walked each night in sleep: stretching, distending, neverending, each dark and forgotten mystery deeper than the last. The trees that lined it were like dim-witted sentinels, casting tall and drooping shadows. The overall effect was both stately and grim. The fear of God.

So be it.

He wondered where the rat-things were tonight.

Ahead, Billy could see the Mall widen out into the plaza that marked the Naumburg Bandshell. He could see the hundreds of empty seats lined up in front of the semicircular stage, its amphitheater backing. It looked like a swankier version of all the little outdoor stages he'd played in the golden olden days, for free concerts and protests and Battles-of-the-Bands.

He couldn't resist the stage. He had never been able to. It drew him not so much to perform as to *explain* himself: who he was, why he was, what it meant. It drew him irresistibly, filled his lungs with exhilaration and dread.

As always, he moved toward it.

There was no one to applaud him as he left the Mall and moved straight down the center aisle, between the seats. There was no one to cheer him as he mounted the stairs and stood six feet above his imaginary audience. There was no band to accompany him, no amp to plug in to, no guitar strapped across his shoulders. He felt, for a moment, absurd and naked and very much alone. He shrugged it off as best he could.

Billy Rowe stood front and center, arms outstretched toward the park and the city beyond. He felt heat upon his skin: an imaginary spotlight from Heaven.

And then he began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, bringing the full power of his singing voice to bear behind it. "You're probably wondering why I've gathered you here today." He harumphed, sly and clownish, made a major ordeal of hocking up phlegm, and continued.

"A week ago, I would not have been here. A week ago, I was as good as dead." He sighed, expansive and dismissive all at once. "Now, it seems, you couldn't kill me if you tried. I still don't know why. It's weird but true."

The empty seats stared back at him blankly. He began to

populate them with faces of memory. His roommate. His rival. The woman he loved. The pain-in-the-ass angel who started it all. The poor, long-ago Chilean immigrants, their faces still bloodied by jackboots and truncheons. The hundreds who'd stood and cheered for him when he stood up against Three Mile Island and nuclear Armageddon, all those many years before.

The three young women, so recently dead, who would still be alive if he only had known about the Power ...

"No, no," he mumbled, biting back on the guilt. This was not a time for self-recriminations. This was a time for action. He smacked his freshly healed right hand against the flat palm of his left, let the sharp staccato of it spark him back into sync with his mission.

"OKAY!" he hollered. "THE BOTTOM LINE, THEN. I'VE GOT THE POWER NOW, PEOPLE. THAT MEANS NOTHING CAN STOP ME. NOT YOUR SWITCHBLADES. NOT YOUR BULLETS. NOT YOUR BOMBS."

"BUT IT'S COSTING ME EVERYTHING I LOVE IN THIS LIFE, AND THAT SORTA PISSES ME OFF."

He smiled at the ghostly faces in the crowd. Not a pretty smile at all.

"SO TONIGHT, MY FRIENDS, IS OPEN SEASON. ALL YOU LITTLE SCUMBUNNIES OUT THERE, JUST WAITING FOR SOMETHING SOFT AND INNOCENT TO DESTROY: I'M YOUR TARGET FOR TONIGHT. PLAY AS ROUGH AS YOU WANT. IF YOU CAN NAIL ME, I'M YOURS."

"BUT I'M WARNING YOU NOW: IF YOU FUCK WITH ME, YOU DIE. AS OF TONIGHT, IN NEW YORK CITY, CRIMINALS NO LONGER GET EXAMPLES."

"THEY ARE EXAMPLES."

"GOOD NIGHT."

The imaginary applause was deafening. So much so that it could easily have passed for silence. Billy bowed, straightened, bowed again. He was doing it for the Commonweal, sure; but he was also, maybe *mainly*, doing it for himself. It was worth another bow, whether anybody caught it or not. He took it.

And then the first real applause erupted behind him.

Billy turned to his left. Five guys were coming down the stairway that wound around behind the bandshell. They looked suitably impressed with themselves. A few of them were handsome and strong. All of them acted as though they were.

"That was great!" enthused the guy in the front. He was one of the genuine ones: thick hair, classic Hispanic conqueror-face, smoldering eyes, formidable build. There wasn't an ounce of fear in him. "We wanna hear some more!"

"SPEECH! SPEECH!" bellowed the two guys directly behind him. They were slightly more unbecoming: twin brothers, perhaps, as they shared the same lump-headed features. They were both bigger than Billy; put their heads together, and they might have been smarter, too. They reminded Billy uncomfortably of the rat-things in the loading dock at Little West 12th Street. Such brilliant mimicry. Almost human, in fact. He cursed the comparison, because it put a chill in his spine that had no good reason to be there.

The rat-things, with their flat black eyes, were nowhere to be seen.

"Action speaks louder than words," Billy said.

"OOO!" cried the leader of the Puerto Rican punks, flapping his wrists in mock dismay. He had a winning smile that Billy instantly hated. "OOO OOO OOO! Baby, you got me so scared I don't know what to do." All four of the guys behind him laughed. They were climbing the stairs to the stage now, and Billy could see the two guys to the rear: the smallest, not surprisingly, though both of them were armed with knives and bicycle chains.

Billy had to take a second and get his head straight. He'd never confronted so many people all at once; he knew they couldn't hurt him, but it scared him anyway. He only had a whole lifetime to terror to unlearn, and one whole second in which to do it.

*Gonna be okay*, he told himself. *Gonna be just fine. Let's go.*

Billy held up his empty hands for display and started walking toward them. The gang of five stopped, apparently puzzled. "No weapons," he said "Just wanted to let you know."

Fearless Leader flashed an *I can't believe this guy* look at his boys. "He's gonna take us all on with his bare hands!" he announced. Then he turned back to Billy and said, "Okay, home boy. You do that. Hope you don't mind if we use ours, though."

Billy shrugged. "Doesn't matter. You're dead meat, no matter how you slice it."

Fearless Leader stopped smiling. A fierce and solemn concentration crept over his features. "Fan out," he said in a low voice, gesturing with his hands to either side. His eyes never left Billy's face.

Billy's face was smiling, a wicked and utterly confident leer.

He was using Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange* as his role model now, trying to think of how little Alex would deal with the situation. The punks were spreading out around him now, encircling him: the Ugly Twins to either side, the twerps moving behind him.

He just kept coming at Fearless Leader, slow and deliberately paced. He locked eyes, not letting himself blink, peering deep into the pupils that were slowly contracting as the terror began to take root ...

... and then Fearless Leader snapped, Billy's name for him rendered abruptly absurd. "GET HIM!" he screamed, staggering back, almost retreating right off the edge of the stage and down the stairs.

The Ugly Twins moved in from either side. Billy feinted toward the right, then plunged full-tilt into the one on his left. The butt of his right hand came up under the nose of Ugly Number One. There was a wet snap that sent bone fragments rocketing through the underdeveloped brain. Ugly Number One was dead before he hit the stage.

Billy felt something sharp slide deeply into his back. It didn't matter. He jabbed back fiercely with both elbows, heard and felt the splintering of ribs. Ugly Number Two was falling back when Billy whirled and pounced. Ugly Number Two began to scream. It didn't matter, either.

Now, Billy thought, bringing his fist down on the punk's throat, feeling the Adam's apple explode beneath his knuckles. His fist went clear through the stage, taking the apex of Ugly's spinal column with it. Billy hadn't anticipated that much strength behind his blow. Wow, he thought, withdrawing the bloody hand from the hole in the wood.

Then the sound of retreating footsteps from behind him made him turn. The two twerps had wisely decided to split; they'd made it to the far end of the stage, were in the process of leaping off.

Billy made them spontaneously combust in midair.

A pair of shrieking, flaming scarecrows landed on the concrete plaza. One of them flailed around on the ground for a minute before curling into itself. The other one struggled to its feet and ran—more of a lopsided stagger, to be honest—gaining almost a yard before collapsing to its knees like a Buddhist monk in the act of self-immolation. The stink of burning clothes and bodies wafted cloyingly back toward the stage. Billy's nose wrinkled, but

his heart was unperturbed.

Now, he thought, for *Fearless Leader*.

But *Fearless Leader* was already gone.

Francisco Sinagra was running for his life, which was not a bad idea. His four dead friends had bought him the time. He prayed to God that it was enough.

Frankie, as his friends used to call him, was running up the steps beside the bandshell. Above him were the twisted, tortured shadows of Crazyland. If he could get up there in time, he could lose the fucking maniac at his heels.

Crazyland was Frankie's name for the Wisteria Pergola. It was a rather large arbor, wide as an average suburban street and long as one of its blocks. The place was literally crawling with wisteria vines, the thick greyish bark making them look like nothing so much as elm trees on acid. There was something distinctly snakelike about the way they grew over the trellaces: thin and spiral-entwined as garter snakes at some points, anaconda-huge and bulging as if recently fed in others. It was one of the creepiest places that Frankie had ever seen. It was also his gang's longstanding hangout, a place that had always offered him security before: there was, he remembered sickly, even a six-pack of beer waiting for him up there.

If he got out of this alive.

Frankie reached the back of the bandshell just in time to meet the one-man hit squad, coming up from the other side. He screamed and swung wildly with his right hand. Fortunately, it still held the bicycle chain, which whistled through the air and clipped the eyes of his assailant. The scream that followed was music to Frankie's ears. But he didn't stick around to capitalize on the possable blindness.

He hadn't failed to notice that Guitermo's knife was still jutting out of the cocksucker's back.

Frankie ran and ran up the steps to Crazyland, its blackness looming ever larger before his eyes. Twelve steps, ten steps, eight steps, six; he took them two at a time, pushing with every ounce or power in his muscular legs. He could still see Paulo and Alfredo bursting into flames, still smell the crisping fat and hair. His mind rattled off the Spanish equivalent of *Oh God, sweet Jesus, please help me, oh God* as he ran past the sixth step, the fourth step, the second ...

... and then he was there, the shadows engulfing him, the mutant wisteria motionlessly coiled across the trestled walls and ceiling, occasionally scraping the pavement. He spotted the brown paper bag with the six-pack inside, thought about grabbing it, violently shook his head. That was crazy shit. Outside the park, there were fifteen million available outlets for as many beers as he could swallow. All he had to do was *run, run* ...

He ran, footsteps pounding sound through the air like exploding Claymore mines. He ran, afraid to look back. Afraid not to. He knew that the nightmare could erupt at any second, knew intimately the second hand's ticking momentum. Afraid to, afraid not to, he peeked over his shoulder at the entrance to the Pergola.

The man was there.

Frankie could see the black silhouette even after he turned back to stare in the direction he ran. It was an iron-on decal, affixed to the inside of his retinas. He watched it move, extending its arms like a voodoo priest in a cheesy old Bela Lugosi film at play in the arena behind his eyes ...

... and then *Crazyland began to stretch, impossibly, the access stairway to the 72nd Street Transverse pushing yards and then acres and then miles ahead as the arbor elongated, and time seemed to slow down* ...

... and then the vines began to writhe, wisterian gyrations that had no bearing on the real world as he had always understood it, just as that real world had no bearing on the undulating telescoping *Crazyland* that he ran through now in slow slow motion while the dark shadow man on the inside of his eyeballs stood stock-still, shadow fingers pointing distinctly at the tips of the extended arms pushing out the terrible Power ...

... and then something thick and unyielding caught him just below the kneecaps bruising flesh and muscle and bone as it tripped him, sent him hurtling headlong toward the equally unyielding pavement. He landed, shrieking not so much at the pain as at the incumbant horror of it, the this can't be happening factor which refused to go away, intensifying instead ...

... as the vines began to encircle him, warm faceless serpents that came from every direction to loop around his wrists and ankles, thighs and forearms, throat and throat and throat. He struggled against them. They tightened in response. It was no contest. One particular blind monstrosity, two feet thick, insinuated itself under his back, lifting him painfully, ass cheeks in the air, then coiled

and coiled around him like a constrictor that plays with its food. He tried to scream, but the impulse was throttled. His bulging eyeballs rolled in their sockets, seeing nothing but horror in the slithering panorama ...

... and then the man was before him, a blacked-in outline whose features were indecipherable in the gloom. Somehow, Frankie knew that the man was still smiling, and that made everything so indescribably worse that he was amazed he didn't die right then and there. The killer seemed to sense it, which twisted the terror dial up yet another several notches.

And then the man began to speak.

Fearless Leader, it said. Such mockery. Such contempt. Terror is your life. Am I right? I think so, yes. Scaring the living shit out of people while you rob and rape them is the thing that makes your job worthwhile. True or false?

Answer me truthfully, and I might just make it easier on you.

Maybe.

Frankie had never raped a woman in his life, if you didn't count Sylvia, Clara, Liz, Sue, Fernanda, and a dozen other girls whose names he couldn't remember under this moment of duress. Sure, he'd used the time-honored techniques of violence and intimidation; but that was just the way these things were conducted. All of them—well, most of them—had been most accomodating by the end. That wasn't rape. That was getting one's rocks off, pure and simple. There was a difference, even if he couldn't really articulate it.

He tried to explain, but no wind would pass from his lungs to his lips. Somehow, he sensed that it didn't matter. The man who was about to kill him probably wouldn't have bought it, anyway.

He gurgled instead.

Fine, his assassin said. And that's why I've got a special fate in store for you.

Something sharp and, at one time, wooden pierced the arch of cartilage at the back of his neck. Frankie felt it skewer through, punching past whatever impeded its progress to the inside of his mouth. He tasted the spray of blood and meat and bone as it landed on his tongue ...

... and then the horror forced itself out of his mouth, did a ninety degree turn, and stared straight into his eyes. This one had a face with cold golden eyes and many many sharp teeth that

*bared themselves as the creature, impossibly, spoke.*

I'm going to scare you to death, it said, and it was true.

He was. Quite literally.

Scared. To. Death.

Billy stared down at the contorted corpse before him. Nothing touched it but the warm air and the cool pavement. Nothing had. The wisteria hung much as it always had, motion restricted to growth, the sub-atomic dance, and the caprice of the breeze.

The length of the pergola was unchanged as well. And the only thing sticking out of Fearless Leader's mouth was his slightly-swollen tongue.

*A mind is a terrible thing to waste,* Billy mused softly chuckling. *But in this case what the hell.* He couldn't stop the hiccuping sounds of amusement, any more than he could stop the spinning of the earth.

Although, perhaps, not even that was beyond him.

The lesson of Kennan Wyath was still vivid in Billy's mind as he rifled through Frankie Sinagra's pockets. The results were pleasantly staggering. Aside from a beautiful Swiss switchblade with gold inlay on the handle, he had a genuine Argentine leather wallet stuffed with dozens of pictures of gorgeous girls and one hundred eighty seven dollars, mostly in twenties.

*Figures.* Weighing the ill-gotten gains in his hands. *It pays to be a scumbag. Nice work if you can get it.*

He pocketed the money, put the rest of the stuff back. It was important that the boy be ID'd later. Part of the legacy he was leaving behind him.

The bag of beer was still by the pergola exit. Billy stopped to check it out. He was stunned to find not pony bottles of Miller, but a six of Samuel Smith's Nut Brown Ale. The stuff ran for nearly three bucks a bottle. "Yeah you were a class act all right," Billy muttered. Then he popped one open with his thumb and went back down to the bandshell.

The Ugly Twins looked better than ever, particularly when he found a hundred and fifty dollars between them. Either Frankie cut them in for less, or they weren't quite as thrifty in their spending habits. No matter how you sliced it, it was a big surprise.

Billy didn't bother to check out the other two guys. They were still letting off greasy black plumes of smoke. But they kept the gnats out of his face as he walked between them, heading

toward the Bethesda Fountain and beyond.

*Six down, now.*

*And so many more to go ...*

The cleanup had officially begun.

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# *The Cats of Thermidor*

by PAUL WITCOVER

In the dream, wherever I turned,  
something was there— invisible  
but undeniable— pacing me,  
herding me.

My friends had informed me in no uncertain terms that anyone who was stupid enough to go to Paris that summer would deserve everything that he got. Didn't I read the papers? Didn't I watch TV? People were getting blown up every day over there in a rash of bombings that had the police baffled and the city terrified. To listen to them, it almost seemed that it might be safer to visit Beirut or El Salvador than a Parisian café, the preferred target of the terrorists.

I was traveling to Paris to gain access to certain documents in the Archives de France pertaining to that episode of the French Revolution known as the Reign of Terror. With them, I had reason to hope I would be able to make the original contribution to the history that I had dreamed of for so long . . . and in the process shore up my shaky prospects for tenure at the university. It had taken more than a year to secure the necessary permission from the French government, and I wasn't about to let a few bombs stop me now.

I arrived at Roissy Airport on the evening of July 28th, the 10th of Thermidor by the old revolutionary calendar and, not coincidentally, the date of the execution of the dictator Maximilien Robespierre—the act which had rung down the curtain on the Reign of Terror in 1794. Months before, when making my plane reservations, it had given me a secret thrill to think that I would begin my intensive research into this bloody and fascinating period on the anniversary of its close; like most historians, when it comes



to dates I am virtually superstitious.

I had already arranged through the university's housing exchange program to sublet an apartment for the length of my stay in Paris. I gave the address to a taxi driver in my untamed midwestern French, then sat back to enjoy the ride. I must have dozed off, because for a time it seemed to me that the streets we drove through were those of revolutionary times, ablaze with lamps and crowded with carriages and people in a feverish melange of misery and ostentation that threatened with each moment to explode into a riot, or worse. Everything was just as I had always imagined from reading the history books. But the screech of the brakes as we pulled to a stop outside 5 Rue Augereau woke me. Still half-asleep, I fumbled for the proper coins to pay the taxi, then hoisted my two suitcases and entered the building that was to be my home for the next month, all the time I had before the start of a new semester would end my research.

There was an ill-lit, narrow entranceway that extended back to angularly spiraling stairs of glossy dark wood. The apartment the university had procured for me was on the fifth floor. Squinting against the dark, I began to climb the staircase, which creaked ominously with each step I took. As I turned the corner to the fourth floor landing, I tripped over something in the shadows. A sudden, anguished scream nearly sent me tumbling back down the stairs, my suitcases right behind me. When I had regained my balance, I saw that a large black cat stood blocking my way. I didn't think I'd ever seen a cat so black, as if formed out of the darkness that pooled in the corners of the staircase. Its back was arched, its fur gone spiky. Its eyes burned into me like twin emerald fires and from its throat came an awful sound that made me fear, for a second, that it was about to throw itself upon me. Just then the door to my left opened, and the cat sprang inside. I had just time enough before the door slammed shut to smile weakly at the young woman there—but her eyes seemed no more forgiving than her cat's had been.

Continuing up the stairs, I noticed a sharp stinging in my right leg. When I finally got inside my apartment and turned on the light, I saw that the son of a bitch had clawed me right through my pants. Despite what seemed at first glance a lot of blood, the cut wasn't deep, and I managed to find some bandages and iodine in the bathroom.

The wound tended to, I took stock of my new apartment.

According to the university, the place belonged to an artist who was vacationing in Tunisia. It was a small and tidy studio crowded with a bed, a desk, and a bookcase filled with old English and French paperbacks. There was a nook that served as kitchen—complete with stove, sink, and midget refrigerator—and a cranny for bathroom that boasted a toilet and shower. Two windows overlooked a small courtyard wrapped in the shadows of laundry hung out to dry in the sticky summer air. It was the refrigerator that claimed my immediate attention; tired as I was, I found that I was hungrier still. But the cupboard was bare; I would have to go out if I wanted to eat.

The street was empty and quiet between the skewed shapes of cars parked half on and half off the sidewalks. I picked a direction and started walking. The hot air was stirred by an occasional hot breeze. I rounded a corner, and there—burning high above the ornately frescoed fronts of the apartment buildings along the Avenue Rapp, like a ladder of pure light left leaning against the dull, yellow sky—was the Eiffel Tower. Further up the avenue the tables and chairs of cafés spilled out onto the sidewalk like bright, inviting oases. People clustered there, eating and drinking and talking despite the lateness of the hour.

I took a seat at a table where someone had left a copy of that day's *Paris-Soir*. After ordering, I picked it up and read it while waiting for my meal. A story on the unsolved bombings caught my eye.

Five people had died in the latest attack, the twelfth in the series of bombings which, so far at least, had struck only in or close to cafés, a pattern the police felt was due primarily to the easy accessibility of such places. As with the eleven bombings that had preceded it, the choice of target in the latest attack seemed completely random and witnesses were unable to provide the slightest leads. The explosion itself had been powerful enough to destroy whatever evidence the terrorists may have left behind. Still, enough evidence had been gathered after previous bombings to convince the police that all the attacks were linked, probably the work of a previously unknown terrorist group despite the many calls and letters from known groups that never failed to claim responsibility in the aftermath of each attack. Though they had not yet solved the case, the police were confident, on the basis of information that was being withheld from the public for obvious reasons, that a breakthrough was imminent. The story closed with a quote from a police official urging people to remain calm but to

exercise caution in visiting cafés. That advice sounded good to me, even if, as it appeared, my fellow customers had decided to ignore it. If these bombings struck only in and around cafés, then I would just make certain to stay away from them. I ate my meal quickly, paid the check, and hurried home.

Back in my apartment, the air was hot and stuffy. I went to the windows above the courtyard and flung them open, leaning out in hopes of a breeze. Then I jerked back, startled by the hiss of hot breath and the sight of emerald eyes blazing in the darkness. It was the same cat I had tripped over earlier, sitting patiently on my window ledge as if it had been waiting there for hours for me to poke my head outside. How it had climbed up so high I couldn't imagine. As soon as I pulled away, the cat jumped lightly to the floor, where it sat looking up at me with eyes glowing like green lanterns at the bottom of the sea, purring loudly and lashing its tail from side to side. It was a big cat.

I leaned down cautiously to pet it, remembering all too well the scratch on my leg, which was still stinging. But the cat was friendly now, pushing its head against my hand.

"Nice kitty," I said. "No hard feelings. I'd offer you some milk, but I haven't had a chance to go shopping."

The cat began to lick its paws as if to say that it had already eaten.

I had to laugh. "You want to stay for a while? I guess you can get down the same way you got up. Me, I'm turning in."

I had just taken off my shirt when there was a knock at the door. "Who is it?"

A woman's voice answered in French-accented English. "Your neighbor from downstairs. Have you seen my cat by any chance?"

I opened the door. "Come on in. He's here. You can introduce us."

I did my best not to stare; the woman was wearing a black silk dressing gown, loosely belted, the top open just enough to reveal the pale, moonish curve of one breast cupped in shadow. Her eyes were wide and almond-shaped, nearly as green as her cat's.

She hesitated in the doorway, seeing that I was half-dressed. "Excuse me; you were about to sleep . . ."

"That's all right. Please come in." I didn't want to let such a beautiful sight slip away so easily.

As she came in, the woman's eyes went straight to her cat

which, with almost the same motion, turned its eyes to her. I was to see it many times, this uncanny synchronization of movement between them, evidence of the deep bond they shared, but I never grew used to it. She held out her arms, and the cat leaped into them with a throaty meow. Then she turned back to me with a smile, absently stroking the cat which rested in her arms as though cradled in the sturdy branches of a tree. "I hope he didn't get into any mischief."

"I think he wanted to apologize for scaring me before." I decided not to mention the scratch. "I'm just amazed he was able to climb up here."

She laughed. "He can climb just about anywhere he wants to. He's always getting into trouble."

"Sounds like a real terror."

"He can be."

We stood for a moment without speaking, looking at each other with timid smiles. I had the distinct feeling that she didn't want our encounter to be such a brief one any more than I did. "My name's Paul," I said. "You speak English very well."

She laughed, delighted. "I don't really. I went to school in Chicago a long time ago. I'd like to go back some day. I've told Max all about it; he wants to go too."

I bristled at the name of a potential rival. "Max...?"

"My cat. I'm Chantal."

"Enchanted to make your acquaintance, Chantal. You too, Max." I held out my hand jokingly to take Max's paw, but before I could touch it the cat flexed its claws and struck at me. The attack was so unexpected that I couldn't pull away in time. I watched in shocked surprise as blood began to well up from a gash in my palm, thick and dark.

"Oh, Max!" Chantal dropped the cat to the floor and took my hand in hers. "I'm so sorry . . ."

I didn't know what to say. I could have killed Max, but I didn't want Chantal to be angry with me. I decided to be a good sport, mumbling something about washing out the cut.

But Chantal did not release my hand. Instead, never taking her eyes from mine, she raised it almost reverently to her lips and, with her rough, wet tongue, licked away the blood. A hot tingling started at her touch that washed from my palm outwards, over my entire body, until my knees began to tremble. When she lowered my hand, I saw that her cheek was smeared with blood.

Without another word, I slipped my hands under Chantal's robe and pulled her down to the floor.

We kissed, teeth hitting teeth, the breath crushed from our bodies as we rolled over and over the hard floor. It was as if, since our passion had been kindled by blood, it could only find expression in bloodletting. Chantal was all over me, biting and scratching. I tasted the bitter stickiness of blood on my lips and felt its warmth dribble from my shoulders down my back. But my wounds only made me hungrier for more of these strange, excruciating pleasures. I felt as though I was continually dying and being reborn at her cruel, loving hands and mouth. I could deny her nothing. For the first time in my life, I was emptied of every desire but the will to surrender totally to another human being, and this I did gladly, opening myself to her invasion without guilt or shame or remorse. The pain lifted me right out of my skin until I couldn't hold back any longer. As I felt my control slipping, I spied Max's disembodied eyes glittering greenly in the shadows across the room like those of a demonic Cheshire cat.

It was only when the first pale light of dawn began to seep through the windows that we stopped. I led Chantal to my bed, and we lay down together as Max curled up by our feet. Though by all rights I should have been exhausted, I was too excited to sleep. All night Chantal and I had barely spoken, and now, clutching her to me with all the strength I had left, I wanted to tell her everything about myself, to reveal all my secret hopes and fears, and to hear all about hers, until nothing separated us.

I spoke of my reasons for coming to Paris, of the documents I suspected lay forgotten in the dusty vaults of the Archives and how they would bring me fame and fortune. I told her what it had been like growing up in a place called Lucas, Missouri, of my parents' dreams and how those dreams had ended in disappointment and divorce despite their best intentions, of my years in New York City as a student and, finally, a professor at the university, wrestling with the hard legacy of their dreams — my obligation to fulfill them.

Chantal listened, lazily scratching the bandage on my leg with one toe. "Is Max responsible for this, too?"

I admitted that he was, but said that I forgave him because he had brought us together.

"You're right; this was all his idea," she said.

"Do you always do what Max tells you?"

"Always, always."

I laughed. "And how does he tell you to earn a living, for example?"

"Right now I design jewelry. Pet jewelry."

"Are you serious?"

"Pet jewelry is going to be the next big thing, Paul. For example, cat collars. All too often these collars are merely restraints, shackles used to make pets into prisoners. My collars are designed with cats in mind—fashion statements of feline personality."

"I see. And you sell them in pet shops?"

Chantal shook her head. "The idea was too revolutionary for them. But I don't need their help. Max is always bringing stray cats home. I feed them, slip on a collar with my name and phone number attached, and send them back into the streets. It's free advertising."

"And people call you?"

"Well, not many. Not yet. But business will pick up once the idea catches on. You'll see. Every day there are more of my cats in the city."

It sounded like a crazy idea to me, but I knew that Parisians were supposed to be more than a little eccentric when it came to their pets. Maybe Chantal was a marketing genius. We talked a little while longer, but at last jet lag caught up with me and I fell asleep.

I dreamed I was wandering the deserted streets of Paris, picking my way past the abandoned shells of automobiles and the burned-out facades of buildings as the shadowy fingers of evening groped inch by inch across the streets. It was as if whatever had taken place there had left no one behind to clean up the mess and start over again. The muggy air smothered all sound and movement save my own, and my steps were so light as to be themselves almost silent.

Yet I was not alone. It soon became clear that something was pacing me, out of sight and far more silent than I, herding me toward some destination as though by alterations in air pressure. I tried to break away from the unseen net that I felt tightening around me, but I could not. Wherever I turned, something was there, invisible but undeniable, forcing me to stay on course. I began to run, no longer aware of my surroundings, blindly trying to escape whatever it was that pursued me. At last I came to the Champs Elysees, stretching straight to the Arc de Triomphe.

I took a step, then stopped short, unable to breathe. My hand flew to my throat. There was a collar there. It dragged me back step by step, as though attached to an invisible leash. Finally the pressure slackened and I could breathe again. I turned around. On the tops of the buildings that lined both sides of the avenue as far as I could see sat hundreds and hundreds of cats, cats of every size and color, from mangy alley toms, their fur matted or coming out in patches, to pampered showroom breeds. The sound of their purring suddenly filled the air. At first I was afraid, but then I realized that the noise was coming from my own throat.

When I awoke late that morning, Chantal had gone. There was a note pinned to the bathroom mirror inviting me down for dinner that night. I showered and dressed in a hurry, eager to begin my research at the Archives.

The Rue Augereau was much changed from the gloomy street of the night before. The cobblestones were puddled here and there from laundry hung on lines that stretched between the houses, and the smell of sunlight drying the clothes filled the hot air with a scent that bubbled to my head like champagne. I walked along, whistling, with a smile for everyone and Chantal's face constantly before my eyes. I even stopped for coffee and croissant at the café I had visited the night before. What bomb could touch me now? I was falling in love with Chantal, and the pleasure of surrendering to the emotion made me feel invulnerable, as though my life carried a secret charm.

The Archives were located in the Marais, the oldest section of Paris, in a group of colorless, decrepit buildings insulated from the bustling world outside by high, thick walls that seemed impenetrable even to time's patient infiltration. Like so many public buildings of Paris, those of the Archives had begun as private dwellings in the honeyed days preceding the Revolution. But not a shred of the laughter and light of those days remained. Walking across the dreary, cobblestoned courtyard, the echoes of my steps were muffled as if under the folds of a heavy blanket, and a slight chill in the damp air as I entered the main building made me wish that I had thought to bring a sweater.

The security was tighter than that which I had experienced upon entering the country, and it was some time, even with my letter of authorization signed by the director of the Archives, before I was admitted. I felt as though I was entering a prison, a modern Bastille. A frosty young woman led me briskly through

a maze of dim corridors and down some stairs to the tiny room which, apparently, had already been prepared for me.

The room was lit by one ancient bulb that oozed its grey light unevenly over lopsided stacks of disintegrating boxes from which yellowing papers leaked like the stuffing of an ancient sofa. There was a dust-covered desk with a wobbly chair and a telephone that my guide told me was connected to the library in case I needed further assistance.

"We've supplied you with photocopies of all materials from the relevant period," she said, speaking in English despite the fact that I had addressed her only in French. "Should you desire to examine the originals, that can possibly be arranged at a later date. There is a bathroom down the hall to your right. Please do not leave this room for any other reason. I'll be back to collect you this afternoon at five o'clock precisely."

"But I didn't bring any lunch," I said in amazement.

"You can order something by telephone and it will be delivered." And with that, she left.

I sat down at the desk, annoyed by the lack of common courtesy almost as much as the excessive security. The room gave me a constricted, abandoned feeling that I didn't enjoy much either and was cold into the bargain. I began to shiver a little. Tomorrow, I vowed, I would bring along a sweater and some food. I picked up the telephone and ordered a cup of hot coffee, then set to work with a vengeance, determined not to let physical discomfort affect my work adversely.

The more I read, the more it became clear to me that I was on the right track. Not only did I find one of the documents I was looking for almost at once, but indications kept cropping up that others might also exist, still more obscure. I could scarcely contain my excitement as I sat there, my coffee forgotten, reading the words set down so long ago by the most enlightened men of their times, men who had—most of them with the best of intentions—run down a second dark age upon their country that had threatened, for a time, to plunge the rest of Europe into endless seas of blood and terror.

Here were the grisly accounts of cold-blooded murder and torture, the spontaneous and not-so-spontaneous massacres, the logical yet horrifying justifications used by lawyers become butchers to defend the regrettable necessities of their new profession. And every word in the faded photocopies came back to one man,

the chief architect of the Reign of Terror and its most enthusiastic disciple: Maximilien Robespierre.

It was impossible to read that name, to pronounce it silently and feel its sharp edges scrape away at the inside of my skull, without a shiver of fear made worse by the claustrophobic chill of the reading room. Gradually, imperceptibly, it came to seem that his icy and vindictive spirit had cut its way free of his decayed body and filled the air around me like an evil cloud. I could almost sense his eyes glittering at my back, burning with revenge and envy and greed like a furnace run amuck, stoked on the souls of countless innocent victims. I found myself half-listening for the heavy tread of soldiers' boots and the sudden knock upon the door that would announce a fate from which there could be no appeal. More than once I had to leave the room, to step into the bathroom and splash my face with cold water before I could bring myself to continue, my reflection in the mirror haggard and drawn, like a stranger's. Yet, at the same time, I felt compelled to continue because of the amazing progress I was making.

When the knock at my door came at five, I gave a cry and nearly jumped out of my chair in fright. I grinned at the same frosty young woman who had led me down earlier, overjoyed to see even her unfriendly face. She looked at me as though all her worst prejudices against Americans had just been more than confirmed, but I no longer cared. I just wanted to get out of there, to see Chantal again.

But my heightened state of nervous awareness persisted even after I had left the Archives. The sidewalks were crowded with people heading home from work, jostling each other into streets jammed with noisy cars. It was only with difficulty that I was able to wade into that stream of packed humanity that surged all around me like one of the bloodthirsty Revolutionary mobs I had just been reading about. The sight of so many bobbing heads had obvious and unpleasant connotations.

I bought a paper in an effort to distract myself, but the headlines were once again concerned with bombings—another café had been blown up that morning. I found myself reflecting on the difference between the guillotine of yesterday and the bombs of today as instruments of terror. Behind the differing methods and justifications, wasn't the terror itself the same, not so much a result of the actions of evil or misguided men as the cause of those

actions? I felt as though a dark and evil cloud had hung over Paris ever since the Reign of Terror, infecting first one, then another, would-be reformer. I seemed to sense that cloud now, settling over the City of Light cloaked in evening's sticky shadows.

It wasn't until I stood inside Chantal's apartment, kissing her beside the door as Max twined his body in and out of the spaces between our legs, that I was finally able to breathe easier.

"Good day?" she asked.

"A strange one. I'm glad to see you."

"Me too."

"And who's this?" A strange cat had wandered into the room to see what all the commotion was about.

"My latest salesman. Max picked him up today. I was just about to put the collar on. Want to see?"

"Sure," I said.

Chantal took me by the hand and led me into what she called her workroom, though I saw by the unmade bed along one wall that she also slept there. There was a large table cluttered with thin, dark collars of a material that resembled plastic, along with metal studs, tangled wires and chips of colored glass—to name only what I could make out in one quick glance. Chantal picked up a collar that had been decorated with curls of wire and patterns of colored glass and handed it to me. "What do you think?"

"Heavier than it looks." I hefted the unexpected weight. "What is it? Plastic?"

She nodded. "Well?"

It reminded me of something the first cat in space might wear. "Very interesting . . ."

Chantal took back the collar. "It's okay if you don't like it. Cats do. Watch."

And, in fact, the cat seemed more than willing to have Chantal fasten the heavy collar around its neck. Max sat close by during the whole operation, purring loudly as if to explain to the other cat its responsibilities as a walking collar advertisement. When Chantal showed the cat out the door, Max followed right behind.

He came back as we were finishing dinner, alone, appearing suddenly in the open window behind Chantal's back like a materializing ghost. Though he made no sound, Chantal was aware of his presence almost before I was. Max leaped into

the room and then onto her lap, from which privileged position he regarded me coolly, his head just above the edge of the table, his eyes gleaming in the light of the single candle we had been dining by.

As we sipped our wine, I began to talk, slowly at first, struggling to find the proper words to express myself without sounding too crazy, about the feelings that had come over me in the Archives.

Chantal listened, stroking Max all the while with the same regular, hypnotic motion. "I know what you mean," she said when I had finished. "It's because of all the bombings. The fear they cause infects everything. But you just have to forget about it. There's nothing any of us can do."

But it seemed more than that, and I said so.

"Don't think about it so much," Chantal insisted. "It's just your imagination running wild. You have to calm down, distract yourself."

"And how do I do that?"

Chantal's answer was to stand up, tumbling Max to the floor. She began to dance in the candlelight, stripping off her clothes as she went. Weird shadows splashed across her, sliding off as if they could find no purchase on the almost blinding whiteness of her body save where her black hair grew—and there they crouched like cats ready to spring. I could only sit there, my heart hammering in my chest, my mouth gone suddenly dry, as she circled the table slowly, moving to a music that only she could hear like a puppet whose strings were being jerked by many different hands. Finally she knelt before me and unzipped my pants. I was already hard, and when she took me into her mouth I felt a storm break loose inside me.

That night our lovemaking was like a dark and furious ritual, an angry appeasement of all that was cruel or violent in ourselves that left our bodies battered and exhausted but our glutinous souls hungry for more. The sleep that came to me at last was a fitful one, and I began to dream, almost at once it seemed, with a vivid intensity such as I had rarely, if ever, known.

I was pushing my way through a thick, unruly crowd in pursuit of a woman I recognized immediately as Chantal. So intent was I upon overtaking her that it was some time before I realized where—and when—I was. But the throng of people that filled the wide plaza, the style of clothing that they wore and the shouts

that came from their throats, and, finally, the guillotine I saw mounted upon a scaffold at the center of the crowd—surrounded by half a dozen heads impaled on pikes like grisly flagpoles and festooned in blue, white, and red bunting spattered with gore—left no doubt but that I was in the Paris of the Terror, at the Place de la Revolution, where all the executions took place.

It was the afternoon of a hot summer day; the sun beat down with an intensity that seemed to drive the crowd mad with the lust for blood. People were hanging out of windows, clinging to lamp-posts, balancing on the edges of roofs as though about to hurl themselves into the churning sea of humanity below. Dogs and cats were everywhere underfoot, chasing each other through the crowd and fighting over scraps of food. Carts filled with bound captives on their way to the guillotine—some in the tattered remnants of aristocratic dress, others plainly "of the people"—plowed through that sea at a snail's pace behind a prow of gendarme's pikes that flashed gaily in the sun. The men and women in the carts faced their deaths as differently as they had no doubt lived their lives. Some wept and shivered uncontrollably, others had their eyes shut tight, their faces turned up to the sky as if praying for a miracle or begging forgiveness, while others watched the crowd with tranquil curiosity or naked hatred or pure, sleepy-eyed boredom. Here and there a condemned prisoner was attempting to harangue the crowd, but it was impossible to hear a word over the frenzied cries of ten thousand raw voices calling the same name—Robespierre.

A shiver went through me when I heard that name, and I raised my voice to shout with the others: "Show us Robespierre! Show us the dictator!"

The gendarmes pointed their pikes to the cart that happened to be at my shoulder, and I looked up to see a man slumped on the straw, his eyes closed, his thin, sallow face pressed against the wooden slats. I knew at once that I was seeing Robespierre by the strip of bloody linen that held his mangled jaw together, the result of a bungled suicide attempt moments before his arrest for treason. Dirty beads of perspiration stuck to his high, pale forehead like sluggish flies. I thought he was surely dead. A woman sprang upon the cart and, clutching the sidebars in one fist while waving the other above her head, cried out: "Murderer of my family, your agony fills me with joy! Go down to Hell with the curses of all wives and mothers!"

To my horror, Robespierre's eyelids flickered open at the sound of her voice. The woman shrieked at the sight of his eyes and tumbled back into the crowd. I understood her reaction. All intelligence had fled those orbs, yet they still burned, in their depths, with a malicious green fire that flickered so stubbornly that I wondered if even death could put it out. I felt the envious dregs of his power tug at me as though seeking to flee the prison of his wasted body, and it was all I could do to force my eyes away before he dispossessed me from mine.

I spotted Chantal shoving her way to the front of the crowd clustered around the scaffold and pushed after her. A pretty flush came to her cheeks as the guillotine did its work, and her eyes shone with real passion. Every so often she would raise a delicate wrist to her face to wipe away the blood that showered down from above or, forgetting herself, lick it from her lips with the darting pink tip of her tongue.

Finally Robespierre himself was taken from the cart. Somehow he found the strength to climb the stairs supported by two gendarmes. When he reached the top, the executioner snatched away his sky-blue cloak and pitched it to the crowd, which trampled the hated garment underfoot. Then he was led to the guillotine, his eyes feverishly searching the crowd. But before getting on with his work, the executioner paused a moment. As if coming to a sudden decision, he ripped the bandage from Robespierre's face. Robbed of its only support, his lower jaw dropped to his breast in a spouting torrent of blood. There burst from him a piercing wail that froze every heart with horror, a sound better suited to a cat than a human being.

I woke with a start, the echo ringing in my ears, to a weight pressing on my chest and the seagreen eyes of Robespierre glowing inches from my own. I gave a howl of mortal terror and sprang out of bed, knocking the body from my chest.

The lights came on. Huddled at the foot of the bed, Max was peering up at me hatefully, ready either to run or strike. I looked quickly away. Chantal sat up, blinking in the glare. "What happened? Are you all right?"

I was shaking. I sat down heavily on the bed, causing Max to bound off. It was plain what had happened, but I still couldn't bring myself to look at Max; the memory of the nightmare was too strong, the resemblance of the eyes uncanny. "Just a bad dream. I'm okay now." But it was a long while, hugging Chantal

to me in the darkness, before I fell back asleep.

The next morning, Max was nowhere to be found. Chantal was angry at me for having scared him away, but I was glad he had gone. As I walked to the Archives, though, I couldn't shake the feeling that he was stalking me from the shadows, just like in my dream. It was all I could do not to break into a headlong run. Then, once inside the tiny reading room, my apprehensions of the day before returned stronger than ever, making it impossible for me to work. Despite the chill, I was sweating, my heart pounding, my spine crawling with unreasoning revulsion. I had to get out, to get away. It didn't matter where.

I walked aimlessly, quickly becoming lost. The further I wandered, the more anxious I became, as though the guillotine's blade hung suspended above my neck by a fraying thread. Afternoon came and went, and evening's shadows began to lengthen like black cats stretching after a long sleep in the sun.

It was then that I saw the cat that Chantal had collared the day before sauntering down a side street as though headed for some tom-cattish rendezvous. I followed it on impulse, rounding the corner just in time to see the cat enter a crowded café. Seconds later, I was knocked off my feet by a punch of hot air that came roaring out of the cafés doors and windows like the first of the devil himself. Bits of glass and wood and other things I did not want to examine too closely were raining down from the sky. I picked myself up and began to run toward the twisted wreckage of the café, where a hellish chorus of cries for help and inarticulate raw screams merged with the sounds of crackling fire and the distant howl of the first sirens.

And then, abruptly, I stopped. I knew. Chantal was the bomber; the collars her bombs; the cats her carriers. How...? But how didn't matter; I had to know why. I had to hear the reasons from her own lips. Then I would know what to do.

I turned around and ran back the way I had come, fighting my way like a drunken man past the people who had already gathered to help or just to watch. I was looking for a Metro station, and as I ran through the streets I had the impression that the deepening dusk was swarming with cats, a black river rushing right over my head and sweeping me along with it.

Riding home, I did not notice the stares of the other passengers or answer any of their questions. I knew that I was wounded from the blast, but I couldn't feel a thing inside or out. When the

train stopped at the Ecole Militaire station I lept out, fighting off the hands that tried to hold me back, that had wanted to help me. I didn't need their help.

I ran up the street, turning onto the Rue Augereau as a blast knocked the windows out of the fourth floor of number five. It did not seem to be as large an explosion as the one I had just witnessed, but it was large enough. I found Chantal in her workroom. Her head had been blown off her body. I picked it up, staring into her glassy brown eyes in horrified fascination.

The police found me in that position and promptly placed me under arrest. I spent the next two days in jail. Apparently, Chantal had been a suspect in the bombings for a long time, and the police had been very close to making an arrest before the accidental explosion had saved them the trouble of having to prove their case. But the explosion had also robbed them of a terrorist to put on trial, and they were determined that I should make good that loss. However, despite their attempts to incriminate me, it became obvious that, though I had been her lover, I had known nothing of her terrorist activities. Finally they were obliged to release me.

My apartment had been damaged in the explosion, but I had nowhere else to go. It didn't matter to me anyway. Without Chantal, even the prospect of continuing my research had no appeal. But when I got home, a familiar sight greeted me, one that I had given up all hope of ever seeing again: Max. He looked pleased to see me, and I was sure glad to see him. I picked him up and hugged him, searching for Chantal's image in his deep green eyes.

"You're coming back to New York with me, Max. What do you think of that?"

He purred loudly, arching his back to receive my caress, his eyes boring into mine. I felt myself drowning in murky green waters as, far away, the muffled report of a guillotine's blade sinking into the block seemed to echo down the centuries.

The one thing that had bothered me about Chantal's death was that her eyes, frozen in her severed head, had been brown, not green. I had said nothing about the discrepancy to the police, believing that she must have been wearing contact lenses to disguise her appearance. But that question was cleared up for me the next time I happened to glance into a mirror.

My eyes were nearly as green as Max's.

# Dancers

by LEWIS SHINER

The robots twisted and spun,  
as though caught up in an unearthly dance,  
scratching out the sinister parameters  
of some cybernetic art.

She never looked away from the monitors, her fingers crawling like pale spiders over the keyboard. In the cramped room below, four faceless chrome steel robots writhed in spastic *tai-chi*. Each movement was a subroutine, read from an FM signal generated by Poly's program.

"Beauty," said Sy, who was running the master VTR.

Poly's hand moved to the ten-key, zooming in an overhead, and the monitor flashed stiff chrome nipples, erect steel penises, just visible under the orange quilted frocks. She cut to slo-mo for a final, blurred sweep across the bodies.

"Hot," Sy said. "Really hot, babe."

The program scrolled off the screen. She let her hands fall into her lap. Not so hot, she thought. Strictly art imitates art. But good enough for *CableVogue*.

What she'd wanted was to get the feel of the robot dancers that were suddenly everywhere on cable. In the two years the robots had been commercially available nobody had found much to do with them; they didn't have enough dexterity to work an assembly line and they were slaves to their programming. Poly had done a couple a static layouts with them for *CableVogue*, but other than that they had ended up collecting garbage and handling nuclear waste.

Then the first dancer tape had shown up on an access channel. Nobody knew how long it had been happening, the robots spinning and posing in their own twisted, cybernetic art form, but

once it caught on the cable was full of it.

The style was more complex than it looked. Poly had approximated the timing with a random number generator, but she knew she didn't have the essence of it. The failure left her irritable and a little depressed.

Just the perfect mood, she thought, to go see Helen.

She dropped down the ladder to the living room of the converted studio flat. Sy was working his way through the robots, collecting the one-of-a-kind, stapled-together designer originals and putting them on hangers. The robots, disconnected from the transmission, slipped into a maintenance mode that was part of their firmware. A thin film of oil seeped out of their joints and then disappeared as they stretched slightly, slumped forward, and went dead.

"Good shit," Sy said to her.

She nodded and pulled heavy drapes off the window. The inside of the paperweight Helen had given her last year was moving slowly in the last rays of the sun. It was a glass dome with two perpendicular foil sails inside, held in a vaccum. The fronts of the sails were silver and the backs were black and it was so perfectly balanced that the pressure of the sunlight alone could make the sails spin.

"What now?" Sy said.

She looked at the robots. "Get them out of here."

"Okay."

She took her jacket off the hook behind the door.

"Hospital?" Sy asked.

She nodded again.

"Any...?"

Word? she thought. Improvement? Hope?

"No," she said.

**S**he dozed off in the cab. It was sleep as defense, the kind of sleep that comes after early alarms and before appointments with abusive clients. She woke up at the hospital and wandered groggily into an elevator.

Why do I keep coming? she asked herself. Helen doesn't even expect it any more. Is it just that if it hadn't been for the cancer we would probably have broken up? That I got pressured into something that's pretending to be love because she's going to die?

The elevator chimed her floor. She stumbled getting off and

nearly fell. Even my own feet are trying to keep me away, she thought.

The overhead lights were on in Helen's room. Poly stuck her head through the doorway, saw a doctor on either side of the bed. They had Helen's gown up so they could look at the growth. When they noticed Poly they nodded vaguely at her and kept talking.

The medical name for it was Type II Teratocarcinoma. Superficially it resembled malignant teratoma, a fairly rare cancer that attacked germ cells in the ovary and testes. Teratomas produced specialized tissues—skin, hair, sometimes even teeth. But teratoma was just cancer, and most cancer was under control these days, between radiation and chemo and beta carotene.

The new tumors didn't respond to any standard techniques. When the pathologists autopsied them they found something they'd never seen before. The new virus, and they were pretty sure it was a virus, was even more specialized than teratoma. Sometimes it built kidney cells, sometimes liver cells. One built a nearly functional, hormone-secreting ovary inside a patient's scrotum.

But most of all it liked to make brain cells.

The patients called it T-2. Some of them called it Tea-For-Two. Easier, Poly thought, than to go on day after day calling it by its real name.

Cancer.

Through the thin, jaundiced skin next to Helen's hip she could see the whorls and indentations of the first-sized tumor. In a matter of days, a week or two at most, it would poison her liver or perforate her intestines and she would die.

One of the doctors pulled the gown back over the swelling and smiled. "Sorry," she said, and Poly smiled back at her mechanically. The doctors left and Poly wondered how they could stand it, the sight of muscles tight with pain, the stink of stale farts and antibiotics, the sound of men crying hopelessly in the dark.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Helen.

"Super," Helen said. "Hundred and two percent."

Poly moved her feet uncomfortably. She couldn't find any humor in the disease, black or otherwise, and attempts at it struck her as tasteless and cruel. She remembered a visitor in the cafeteria wearing a t-shirt that said, "Cancers Need Love Too." Under the words was a drawing of the hideous, mutated heart they'd taken out of one woman's belly.

"Really," she said.

"Okay. No pain. How's work?"

"Another *Vogue* shoot. The new Versace stuff. It's nice."

Helen nodded and closed her eyes. Her blond hair looked grey and shadows made long vertical lines down her face. On the right side of her forehead was a smudge of yellows and browns.

"Your head . . ."

"Nothing," Helen said, her fingers hovering over the bruise, not quite touching it.

Poly thought of the robots, on their way back to the warehouse now, their harsh clean lines that would never bruise, never age, never bulge with cancer. "What happened?"

"I was . . . sleepwalking."

"Sleepwalking?"

"It happens. With the disease. With . . . this kind of tumor."

For the first time Poly noticed the straps hanging limply from the side of the bed. "Helen, I . . ."

"Don't."

The silence began to sound like it could go on forever.

"You're tired," Poly said at last.

"Yes."

"I'll go."

"Thank you . . . for coming."

Poly squeezed her hand. It was cold, withered, freckled with liver spots. I'm no help, Poly thought. She doesn't even want me here. Because she has the disease and I don't and so we can't even talk to each other any more.

On TV the robots were dancing. Poly left the channel on and walked through the apartment, moving the furniture from where it had been pushed against the walls, shutting the cameras and computer consoles back in their closets. Everything tucked away, back to stark white walls and hardwood floors and cold antiseptic air.

Safe, she thought. Back in control.

She put something in the microwave and watched the TV, telling herself she was doing research, knowing the motion of the gleaming bodies was beginning to hypnotize her, the meaning dancing just beyond her reach.

When the phone rang she answered it without looking away from the screen.

"It's Sy."

"And?"

"I'm at the warehouse. You better get over here."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"You better see it."

**S**pin. Bow. One knee collapsing, then coming back up. One arm out, the other shoulder dropping. Shuffle. Turn. No rhythm. No synchronization. No pattern. But something there just the same, like the barely discernable humanity of twelve tone music.

"Christ," Poly said.

"I just got the last one in. And they started."

"They can't be doing it themselves," she said. "Can they?" Sy shook his head.

"Then who is? Who's running them?"

"I already swept the place. No transmissions. Not in or out."

"*Then what's making them do it?*"

The thrust of a glistening metal hip seemed sexual, threatening. She wanted to look away but couldn't. I was wrong to mimic this, she thought. Alien, yes, sinister, yes, but pure somehow. This dance belongs to whoever is running it.

Whoever it is.

"Don't know," Sy said. "Probably nobody does."

"What about the others? The ones on cable. Some of those are taped around here, aren't they?"

"Yeah, some."

"Where?"

"Clubs. Places downtown. The Licks, I think. Some others."

She started for the door.

"Hey. What if they don't know either?"

"Somebody knows," she said. Somebody could explain, find a compartment to put them in, a word for what she was feeling that would give her a handle on it.

"What about . . . them?" Sy asked.

A smooth, steel oval of a face seemed to be staring at her. The head tilted slightly, quizzically, and then the body underneath it spun it away.

"Leave them," she said.

**T**he downtown sidewalks seethed with life. Neon reflected from mirrored glasses and spattered the dirty white robes of the

shaykers. Just to get from the cab to the front door of the club she had to push her way through what seemed to be a hundred of them, her padded jacket protecting her from their jutting elbows and shoulders.

The inside of the Licks was dark and crowded as the street, but the smoke and beer fumes and the residual amyl nitrate tang added grit to the air. On stage five robots danced, one of them stenciled with a radiation hazard symbol. Huge speakers battered the audience with computer-generated twelve-tone.

Poly's stomach crawled and her eyes burned. She looked for somebody in control. Both bartenders were in full Noh makeup, their faces slack and impassive. The only other employee in sight was a scrawny boy in a sleeveless t-shirt, running lights and tapes from the top of a padded booth.

She had to cross the dance floor to get to him. The small open area was packed with spaced-out shaykers and sullen straights, their feet planted and their bodies swaying to some soundless communal rhythm.

She reached up and rapped on the window of the booth. The scrawny kid stared down at her, the black speaker grid taking the place of his mouth.

"Can I talk to you?" she shouted.

The eyes stared at her without expression, then disappeared. A door opened in the side of the booth and she squeezed through. The space inside was no bigger than the toilet on a plane. The kid sat on a ladder that led up to his controls, his knees on a level with Poly's face.

"The robots," she said. "Who runs them?"

The kid's lips moved, but she couldn't hear him over the noise.

"What?" she shouted.

"Nobody," he repeated. "No transmitter. Nothing. Cops looked. Two, three times. Nothing."

"Where do they come from? How do they get here?"

"Walk. Different ones, all the time."

"Why here?"

The kid shrugged. "You from the cable?"

"No," she said.

"Want some snort?"

"No," she said. "Thanks."

She pushed her way out of the booth. From where she stood

she could see the glazed eyes and parted lips of the mob, swaying back and forth.

Like some crackpot religious cult, she thought, watching their prophets. Or maybe like they were just walking in their sleep.

### Sleepwalking.

She saw where her thoughts were going and her hands and feet went cold.

The front doors of the hospital were locked, so she went in through Emergency. Nobody tried to stop her.

Helen's room was dark. Poly left the door open to get a trickle of light from the hall and quietly moved a chair to the side of the bed.

Helen was asleep, her fingertips twitching in tiny convulsions on top of the straps that held her down. Even through the sheet and the hospital gown Poly could see the bulge of the tumor.

She took the paperweight out of her jacket pocket. In the darkness of the room the foil sails were motionless.

Poly sat and waited, hardly breathing, holding the paperweight directly over the cancer.

New toy, she thought. Come on. Reach out, play with it. I dare you.

Her eyes hurt from staring. She blinked twice, quickly. Or better yet, she thought, just prove me wrong. I'll feel like an idiot, but at least I'll get some sleep tonight.

Slowly the sails began to move.

Poly looked away and then back again.

The sails spun, faster and faster. The dome began to vibrate in Poly's hands. Her teeth sank into her lower lip and she tasted blood. The sails were a grey blur inside the dome.

And then Helen's head came up, eyes open, one clawed hand jerking free from the strap and reaching for the paperweight. The eyes were not Helen's any more. Something blind, deaf, and horribly alien was trying to see out through them.

Poly's mouth opened to scream and nothing came out.

The hand snatched the paperweight away and Poly watched the fingers tighten until it imploded with a sharp crack and tiny bits of glass spewed over the room.

She flinched from the sound and it was enough to break the contact with those awful eyes. She lurched sideways out of her chair and went onto her hands and knees in the broken glass. And

then she ran.

**S**he sat on her couch, a drink untouched on the table beside her. The blood from the cuts on her hands had dried. She sat and turned through the channels on the cable, one after another.

I could never prove it, she thought. But I know it's true.

She thought about all the patients in all the hospitals, about the cancerous brains that grew inside them, minds without eyes, without mouths, without arms or legs or vocal cords. Minds reaching without hands for bodies they *could* control, chrome steel bodies that would live far beyond their few weeks of feeble awareness. Bodies that would live forever.

She dropped the remote control and her hands clenched until the knuckles went yellow with the strain.

On the screen the robots danced.

# The Perfect Gift

by JEAN DARLING

She found it on the Calle Diablo,  
and it cost her just exactly  
what she thought it was worth.

Marsha watched until Edward disappeared behind the looming bulk of the Gran Canaria Hotel, wishing it was Marisol's day to come. The house wasn't so lonely on the three afternoons a week she moved from one room to another pushing sand around with a rag-wrapped stick. The fat, pretty maid had been part of the lease when they had rented the beach house on the Paseo de las Canteras five years before.

The first year had been adventure filled with Marsha caught up in the excitement of making a home in a strange country for a brand new husband. Shopping had been fun then, phrase book in hand, stumbling over the musical words. Now her command of Spanish was more than adequate for day-to-day needs, and the early zeal to increase her vocabulary had waned. Anyway, the effort would have been wasted. She had made no friends to chatter with, having avoided the English-speaking colony in the effort not to be a foreigner. She wanted to melt into the scenery to be just another Spanish señora, but after a while she realized it was not possible. Being hazel-eyed and ash-blond on an island where the only native blondes were bleached made her feel alien and set apart.

Restlessly, the young woman padded barefoot along the wide white-tiled passage, past the shadowy living room with its shutters closed and barred. When new to Las Palmas she had flung wide the windows to the balmy breezes, especially on clear days when Teneriffe, crowned by Mount Tiede, could be seen shimmering seventy kilometers away across the grey-green Atlantic. As time passed and Marsha grew used to local customs her shutters, too, remained closed against the heat of the day.

She paused for a moment to look in the unused room behind

the parlor. It was a strange, unfriendly cubicle, airless except for a transom above the only door that opened onto the hall. She wondered if today was the day to start decorating it as a kind of occupational therapy. Over the years Edward had suggested various ideas, like making it into a guest room, a nursery, a den. Once he had bought an old desk to refinish and put it in the room, but that was as far as it had gone.

Marsha moved on to check in the refrigerator, hoping to find the butter dish empty or the plastic egg depressions bare. She wanted an excuse to go out. Never in all her life had she been able to just go for a walk—she had to have an errand, some goal to give meaning to every little trip.

Halfway up the stairs, Marsha recalled it was the first of the month. She ran back down. "When time passes so fast how can the days drag so?" she asked the wall calendar as she tore away October to reveal a red-ringed date that sent a shudder up her spine.

"Thirteen," she whispered, overcome by an almost unbearable sense of loss. Then, as quickly as the chill of doom had come, it was gone. There was nothing strange about November thirteenth, except it was Edward's thirtieth birthday and it had completely slipped her mind. How could could she have forgotten such an important date, she wondered. And, clapping her hands with delight at the idea of shopping for something really special to celebrate the start of a brand new decade, she ran upstairs to wiggle into jeans and a tube top.

On the way to pick up her shopping basket and purse, she told the canary whose cage hung in the stairwell to be good boy. She felt lighthearted now that the calendar had supplied a way to while away an afternoon or two.

First she went to the Port Market at the narrow end of the island. Not because there was anything like the perfect gift on sale there, but because she loved the bustling life of the place, shrill with the cries of hawkers—soprano, tenor, bass—voices young and old, blended and at counterpoint that made a music indigenous to the Canary Islands. She loved to see the dark-eyed children darting around the produce stands scattered among those selling meat, fish, and staples. The block-square market building itself wore a cummerbund of tiny souvenir stalls facing the street and, though Marsha spent over two hours poking through their tourist-trap treasures, she was unable to find anything suitable even for a

fun present, like the three foot cigar she had bought for his last birthday.

Squinting against the afternoon sun as she waited for the white coated policeman to stop traffic so she could cross, she looked in her basket, hoping she had remembered to bring her dark glasses. It was then she noticed the oblong of green in the bottom. It was the letter she had been writing to her parents the night before, but she couldn't recall finishing it, let alone putting it in her basket to mail. The policeman touched her arm and waved her across. On the other side of the street she picked up the envelope and turned it over. It was addressed and sealed. The young woman shook her head as though trying to clear it. *But I don't remember, I'd swear it's home on the desk*, she thought as, unbidden, her feet slap-slap-slapped along on the way to the post office in Santa Catalina Parque. But on reaching the post office she didn't stop. Moving like a sleepwalker she walked through the gaily colored umbrellas sprinkled like so many exotic flowers at the restaurant end of the flag-stoned plaza. Unbidden, her feet carried her out of the Parque and along a street that led diagonally into the mare's nest of streetlets that sprouted from nowhere when the opposite beaches suddenly veered away from each other to leave enough land on which to build a city. On and on her sandals slap-slap-slapped past rows of shutter-blinded houses until, awaking from her daze, Marsha realized she was lost.

During the first year, getting lost had been one of the charming hazards of living in Las Palmas. Now, when she was sure she knew every nook and cranny, she had managed to lose herself—but how? Last thing she remembered was waiting to cross the street in front of the Port Market. She had been on her way home because of siesta and now twilight was bluing into evening. Where had the day gone, she wondered, glancing up at the street name painted high on the side of a building as she turned a corner. Calle Diablo, it read, in neat letters that glowed eerily in the fading light.

Pale houses lined the street where no child cried, no cat mewed, no dog barked. There were none of the usual sounds of people waking from the siesta. Silence hung like a pall over the narrow street. A silence so still it hummed inside Marsha's head.

"You are late, Mrs. Phillips," a voice said close to her ear.

Startled, she spun around to see a slender, dark-haired man of slightly below middle height standing beside her, and she heard

herself calmly answer, "I'm sorry, I got lost." Yet his appearance was so bizarre, with the aquiline nose curving low over the wide slash of his mouth, that she felt a scream gather in her throat.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Phillips. If you look into my eyes you will see there is nothing for you to fear," the man said in delicately accented English.

"How do you know my name?" Marsha asked, looking into the yellow-flecked eyes that made her feel as though she were wandering in and out of a dream.

Smiling, the man touched the key ring attached to the handle of her basket. "This is yours, is it not?" He turned the leather name tag over with his long fingers.

"What do you want from me?"

"It is not I who want. It is you who seek." The man smiled again. "You wish a remembrance for a loved one." He looked at her thoughtfully. "Ah, yes, you seek. But I wonder how much you are willing to give in exchange. We will see. Here is my shop." His slender hand gestured toward a stretch of unbroken wall directly in front of Marsha, and a door swung open. The young woman stared, unbelieving, at the orange-painted door that had appeared from nowhere. A wrought iron lantern shone on a sign that swayed above the door. It read: ASMODEUS GIFTS.

"You are nervous—perhaps it is the scars on my face." His voice was soft with apology. "An accident many years ago."

"Of course not. I was surprised you knew my name, that's all." *Poor thing, probably burned and had skin grafts*, she thought.

"I fell and the fire—" He held similarly scarred hands toward her. "Skin grafts." Uneasy once more at having the thoughts plucked from her mind, Marsha turned away. "You'll never find your way home without my help." His voice was loud now, commanding. "Turn around!"

As though on a turn-table, Marsha revolved until she was again facing the man. Once more her eyes were imprisoned by his steady gaze. "Enter the shop. There you will find the object you most desire. Take it—but be sure you pay what you think it is worth."

"How will I know what it's worth?"

"Look deeply into my eyes and you will find the answer."

After a moment Marsha gasped. "No!" she said. "Nothing is worth—"

"One word of warning: Do not underestimate the value of

the gift either by error or intent. When you have given what you honestly feel it is worth, leave the shop, turn left and you will be home. Remember, turn left." He bowed her through the door.

"Thank you," Marsha said, turning back. The words floated into the empty street. The man had vanished.

A flutter of apprehension was quelled by curiosity as the woman moved along a dimly lit corridor. On and on she went, through silence broken only by the slapping of her sandals. After what seemed an eternity she came to a door which opened out into a garden lush with tropical plants. In the center an alabaster Pan played his pipes for the nymph who was bathing in the basin of an ancient fountain. Through the veil of water the word: ENTER, written in fiery letters, beckoned her across the patio.

Skirting the alabaster duo, Marsha passed through a velvet curtain and found herself enclosed in darkness broken only by an amber glow hovering waist high. The young woman crept slowly forward, hands outstretched until her fingers met the smoothness of wood and she was staring down at the source of the golden light: a small topaz lizard that glowed with an inner fire.

"Oh, you lovely—you lovely—" Marsha breathed as she lifted the ornament with reverent fingers. Not above two inches in length, the carving had been fashioned with such infinite care for detail that, had it not been cold to the touch, it could have been a living creature, a dragon in miniature.

Its tiny lidless eyes followed Marsha as she turned the exquisite reptile over in her hands, fondling the fineness of the jewel. Desire to possess the topaz shook her to the depths of her being. "My soul," she whispered. "I'd give my—" But her lips would not form the pledge. "Money! How much do I have?" she said instead, while she shook out the contents of her purse onto the table.

With trembling fingers she counted out three thousand, five hundred seventy-three pesetas. "Not enough," she murmured. "Not enough—not even fifty dollars—not enough!" Of course she could go home for the money in her drawer which she should have taken with her in the first place, but Marsha couldn't bear even the thought of being separated from the golden lizard.

"My ring," she told the carving, looking deep into its eyes. "I'll give my ring for you." And she pulled off the four-carat emerald-cut diamond and laid it on the pile of money. She would have to tell Edward she had lost the ring in swimming. It was loose, he had warned her many times not to wear it on the beach. "Now,

you're mine." She tucked the topaz in her tube top and pressed it close. As she did, the word *Exit* appeared in fiery letters at eye level. Marsha's feet carried her forward, until, just as she was about to pass out into the street, she swooped back and snatched up the ring.

Turning left as instructed, Marsha Phillips found herself on the Paseo de las Canteras, facing a sea dappled with early afternoon sunlight. Turning left again she saw the Gran Canaria Hotel looming beyond the house where she lived. Thirty seconds later she was locked inside with her treasure.

For a while on the following day she considered returning to the shop with more money. This idea was dismissed in the realization that the sum squirreled away in the drawer was infinitely less than the reptile was worth. Soon guilt at having taken the ornament became pleasure that it was hers and, finally, cupidity at having had the good sense to keep her engagement ring.

On the second day of the lizard's possession of Marsha, two things occurred to make her momentarily uneasy. The first happened when she showed the carving to the maid, Marisol. The fat woman cried: "Malo! Malo!" with eyes starting from her head as she crossed herself.

"Bad? What do you mean bad? How can anything so beautiful be bad?" Marsha asked, but all Marisol would say was the lizard was evil and should be destroyed. When Marsha stated flatly that she had no intention of destroying the lovely ornament, the fat woman fled, swearing never to set foot in the house again until the talisman of evil was smashed and ground into the earth.

The second incident happened a few minutes later that day when she went to get ice for a pitcher of sangria. The bird cage had been knocked off the spring hook attached to a cross beam. It lay on the floor with the bird's fluffy yellow body jammed between two bars. Its head was gone.

"My God!" she cried, feeling faint. And then, without knowing how she got there, Marsha was in the empty room where she had decided to keep the topaz until Edward's birthday. Several yellow feathers were scattered on the desk beside the lizard, which glowed furiously. A breeze caught the feathers and swirled them around her head.

"You have one more chance," the voice of the gift-shop man said. "If you pay the price, all can still be well." The small yellow-flecked eyes of the topaz reptile gazed into hers. When the voice

stopped speaking the feathers fluttered to the floor. The spell was broken.

"You're as bad as Marisol," she laughed, scooping up the feathers to throw into the rubbish bag with the cage and its decapitated occupant. The following day was the last time Marsha left the house. It was to buy a birthday card, one with a plastic bubble in which a lock of hair could be sent to a loved one.

Now that there was nothing for her to do except wait for Edward's thirtieth birthday, Marsha spent more and more time locked in the empty room. Quite often there was no dinner ready when Phillips came home and no food in the kitchen. Yet when he offered to take her out for a meal Marsha would shrink away to crouch, elbows on knees, staring into space. She was losing weight and she looked drawn and tired. The suggestion that a psychiatrist should be consulted was met with a locked bedroom door.

Edward tried to pinpoint the beginning of Marsha's strange behavior. Firing Marisol for alleged theft hadn't upset her particularly but the canary having his head snapped off by a cat definitely had. Perhaps that was when the long brooding silences had begun. At the time he had tried to make her realize it was impossible to keep cats out of the houses because of the way they were built with the central stairwell open to the skies. But she wouldn't listen.

"It was my fault," she kept insisting, voice dull and listless. She certainly was sickening for something—perhaps a virus, he worried. Then all at once his face crinkled into a smile. How stupid he had been not to think of it before. Marsha was going to have a baby! Of course, Marsha was pregnant!

The square-jawed young man laughed out loud. Pregnancy would explain everything. The restlessness, the prowling at night, the locking herself in the unused room—even firing Marisol. Pregnancy explained everything, as far as Phillips was concerned. He wanted it so much to be true; hardly a day passed when he didn't yearn for a son. He grinned, allowing it could be a baby girl. He didn't really care which it was as long as he was going to be a father.

On the morning of his thirtieth birthday Edward woke alone in the oversize bed. The pillow on which Marsha's head should have rested held a crumpled birthday card with three yellow feathers in its plastic bubble. Clutching the card in his fist, Phillips went through the house calling his wife's name. There was no

answer. Thinking she had gone out for fresh baked rolls, something she did when making an especially nice breakfast, he opened the front door and looked both ways along the Paseo. There was no one in sight except a small boy wearing a straw hat far out on the rocks, fishing in a pool left by the ebbing tide.

Edward yawned, rumpled his hair, and went back into the house with the idea of eating a banana to keep body and soul together until such time as his wife returned to feed him. On passing the empty room he thought he heard voices. He put his ear to the wood panel. A man and a woman were speaking together softly, so softly it was impossible to hear what they were saying. He tried the knob. The door was locked.

"Marsha, who's in there with you?" He pounded on the door. There was no answer. "Marsha, answer me," he shouted. Then he noticed a faint golden glow shining from the cracks around the ill-fitting transom. She's lighting candles, he thought, wanted to surprise me. He laughed out loud, relieved that his wife was her old self again. She was always doing silly little things to please and surprise him.

"You don't have to light all thirty," he called, wondering just who she had with her to share the surprise.

Suddenly, Marsha's high, clear voice floated out into the passage. "Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Edward, Happy Birthday to you," she sang as the door swung open. There was no man in the room nor was there a sign of a cake. The glow came from something small sitting on the old desk beside which Marsha stood, welcoming arms outstretched. But this was a new, radiantly beautiful Marsha with hair that shone like spun gold.

For a moment Phillips stood in the doorway, wondering why the room seemed so dank and chill, and then he was in his wife's arms. She kissed him and handed him the luminous topaz reptile.

"Happy Birthday, darling. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"This is for me?" He turned the small perfect carving over in his hands, the expression on his face changing from awe to admiration to cupidity. "It's exquisite." He glanced up at her. "It's really mine? You know a lot of people would sell their soul to own something as beautiful as this," he murmured.

"I know," she said, fixing him with her yellow-flecked eyes.

# Profile: Ambrose Bierce

by THOMAS E. SANDERS (NIPPAWANOCK)

He was a writer  
who knew how to live.  
And how to die.

His life was a journey that started in one vague but violent bucolic place in the nineteenth century and stopped in another in the twentieth. Beginning in a spiritual geography of fundamental, fanatic religious fervor, it seems to have ended on a military field of political passion. At one end, the war between God and Satan; at the other, the revolutionary battles of Mexico.

Ambrose Gwinnet Bierce began that life on June 24, 1842, on a farm in southeastern Ohio's Meigs County, outside absolutely no place of note. He ended it *probably* on January 11, 1914, at Ojinaga, Mexico, a place equally remote from anywhere recognizable. And in between? The vicissitudes of Nature, neither cruel nor kind except as they are seen through the lenses of man's eyes, lenses ground to his specifications by the optician within. Ranging through those extremes in time, place, and tenor, Bierce wrote. Oh how he wrote! Journalism, critical essays, satire, tales of horror, war stories, tall tales, *The Devil's Dictionary*. Recognized literary classics, unrecognized literary gems, epigrams sharp enough to whittle hypermagical man right down to an amazing miniature, collectable because of the exquisite detail rather than the banal subject.

Born to seventeenth century New England stock that had moved to rural Ohio with little more than subsistence money, a few books, and the religious passion that refuses to let idle

hands become the devil's workshop (using them, instead, to turn the Bible to spiritual growth and the long nights to producing field hands), Bierce was the tenth of thirteen children. The younger ones died early and the older were reduced to inconsequential lumps by the rigid discipline and the hellfire and brimstone religion of Marcus Aurelius and Laura Sherwood Bierce. Ambrose was made of sterner stuff, however, a composition that would, one day, cause him to define religion as "a daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable."

When Ambrose was four, the family moved to another farm in northern Indiana where, for the next eleven years, he developed socially under the bland tutelage of his older brother Albert on their three mile walks to and from school in Warsaw; but he was also influenced by his uncle, Lucius Verus Bierce, who "earned" himself the title "General" by leading an antislavery demonstration into Canada and, perhaps, supplying John Brown of Harper's Ferry fame with some arms. Colorful Uncle Lucius could not have been displeased with Ambrose's two years as a printer's devil on a Warsaw antislavery newspaper, *The Northern Indianian*, for he seems to have underwritten Ambrose's stint at the Kentucky Military Institute where the boy studied surveying and topographical engineering.

That stint was very brief, however, and Ambrose returned to Indiana to work on the farm, in a brickyard, in a general store, and in a saloon. About the only excitement in the lad's life was a short-lived romance—with a local girl he dubbed "Fatima"—before, on April 19, 1861, he enlisted with the Ninth Indiana Infantry.

Assuming the "rebellion" would be of short duration, the organizers of the Ninth Indiana had limited it to three months. Less than two months into his tour, Bierce distinguished himself on the battlefield at Laurel Hill, West Virginia, and, when the Ninth was discharged at the end of its three months and reorganized for three years, Bierce reenlisted and, in some of the fiercest battles of the Civil War, rose through the ranks to be commissioned first lieutenant and become acting topographical officer on the staff of William Babcock Hazen—colorful, cocksure, cantankerous General Hazen, dear to the hearts of Civil War historians for his independence and toughness.

As topographical officer, Bierce was virtually a scout, reconnoitering before battles and preparing reports and maps under strict deadlines and miserable conditions. (Certain worthies would say he

was being admirably trained for a future as author and editor and combatant with publishers.) It was a loner's job, and Bierce did it well. By the end of his three-year enlistment, he had been a part of Shiloh, Chickamauga, Lookout Mountain, and Missionary Ridge. He returned to Indiana where he asked "Tima" Wright to marry him and, when she agreed, reenlisted. She was an inconstant correspondent and, sick with loss of comrades in the battle of Pickett Mill, Georgia, Bierce wrote her sister, "My turn will come in time.... I am very lonely." Whether he had the gift of prophecy or not, he was to fortell his death years later as surely as he foretold his impending injury. (Soldiers going into battle have more than a fifty-fifty chance of injury or death, however, so—apart from building suspense through innuendo—the oracular announcements have less bite as prophecy than as maudlin pleas for attention.)

Fifteen days later, Bierce was shot in the head at the Battle of Kinesaw Mountain. He later said, "The bullet crushed my skull like a broken walnut." (Fortunately, his tropes were to improve later.) Albert was, fortuitously, also at Kenesaw Mountain, and he cared for Ambrose to the point, probably, of saving his life.

Bierce's three month's convalescent leave brought back his health and took away Tima. For unrecorded reasons, their engagement was broken before Bierce returned to duty in September, 1864, and, subsequently, took part in Sherman's March to the Sea and in the less vaunted though strategically more important march from Savannah to Goldsborough, North Carolina. On April 26, 1865, the war was over and, about that time, Bierce was released. He had seen it all, participated in vital parts of it. But it was not yet over for him. He would, years later, write some of his greatest stories about it. Whether his or Stephen Crane's stories were better would become a point of contention—a point as yet unsettled. As surely as the terrors of the bucolic days of his youth would be captured in such stories as "The Suitable Surroundings" and "The Boarded Window," the agony and horror of war would be captured in such works as "Chicamauga" and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

Perhaps his place in the graduate English class would be more secure had he written a novel or two in addition to the short gems on which his reputation rests. Perhaps his definition of the novel explains why he did not write one: "Novel, *n.* A short story padded. A species of composition bearing the same relation to literature that the panorama bears to art."

In the spring and summer of 1865, Bierce worked for the United States Treasury Department in Alabama. He headquartered himself in Selma and commandeered Confederate cotton for the North. At this time (perhaps because he did not approve of himself in his work) he developed the debilitating asthma that was to be the barometer of his emotions for the rest of his life. In happier hours, he also made maps and surveys which he occasionally delivered in person to his superior in New Orleans. Even though it was in the ugly throes of Reconstruction, Bierce was charmed by the city and used it as a port of departure for a trip he took to Panama, returning by way of Acapulco, Mexico. He had a way of getting into places that would, a century later, be the watering holes and art colonies of celebrities and entrepreneurs happy to make their days in the sun.

If the Gulf waters did not wash the unpleasant residues of Reconstruction out of Bierce's system, the proposal that awaited him on his return to New Orleans did. General Hazen had been ordered to inspect military posts and fortresses from Omaha, Nebraska, to San Francisco, California, surveying and mapping Indian territory as he went. The General suggested Bierce apply for a Regular Army captaincy and become the expedition's engineering attaché. This offer was too good to refuse.

Bierce defined reality as "the dream of a mad philosopher." The reality of the Hazen expedition fits that definition. It temporarily eased the asthma attacks and, from July, 1866, to April, 1867, allowed Bierce to take what amounted to an extended camping trip. From Omaha, the expedition followed the Platte to the Missouri, thence to Montana Territory. Crossing Idaho, the group journeyed to Salt Lake City where Bierce became familiar with the tenets of Mormonism and a defender of its adherents in days when they needed all the defenders they could get. Leaving Salt Lake City, the party crossed Nevada to Sacramento, California, and went north to San Francisco. In that city of mists, Bierce's commission reached him. The government had seen fit to grant him only a second lieutenancy. In high dudgeon, Bierce flipped a coin to see if he would accept it or go into the only other profession he had any knowledge of at all: journalism. That coin favored his limited experience as a printer's devil. Without a second thought, Bierce declined the commission.

Nor did he regret the decision. Years later, he was to record, "The coin was right."

Utterly untutored as a journalist, the young adventurer had to make a living while he learned his elected trade. His contacts got him an unimportant job with the U.S. Sub-Treasury in San Francisco, and he set about turning himself into a writer. A few pages of the journal he had kept on his pleasure jaunt to Panama reveal the magnitude of his metamorphosis. The grammar, spelling, and punctuation are worthy of some of today's college graduates who are suing their alma maters for negligence in granting their degrees. They also indicate the scholarly distance he would have to travel before he could produce the two forgettable poems which are his first known publications in 1867.

By December, 1868, however, his stated ambition was observably on the way to realization. "To [write] well you must be acquainted with the language and be a master at the use of words," he had said. And he drove himself to please a new friend, James Watkins, who was English, a journalist, and the managing editor of the house organ of the Aerial Stream Navigation Company which sought to popularize ballooning. Bierce took occasional flights in the company balloon, the *Avitor*; and, when Watkins resigned his editorship of *The San Francisco News Letter and California Advertiser*, Bierce succeeded him.

Taking for his own an existent column in the paper, Bierce turned "The Town Crier" into a widely quoted source of Rabelaisian satire publicly admired in such literary centers as New York and London. Almost in gratitude for the English notice, he opened the pages of the *News Letter* to Algernon Charles Swinburne's mellifluously incomprehensible lines, a decision he must have regretted, for he later met the poet and described him as a Pinocchio prototype who "has brains or he could not write the verse he does; he is insane or he would not."

That capacity for second-guessing himself was also apparent in Bierce's dealings with *The Overland Monthly*, a magazine edited briefly by Bret Harte who was secretary of the Mint when Bierce worked there. When Bierce submitted some papers to him, Harte proposed they be the first installments of a regular department and started publishing them under the title "Grizzly Papers." Harte did not remain with the magazine long, leaving after a disagreement with the owner who also irritated Bierce beyond endurance because he payed his writers as little as possible and allowed the editor who succeeded Harte to alter copy without author approval, a practice Frederick A. Marriott, owner of the *News Letter*, would

not have countenanced. Bierce tolerated the treatment through only five issues before leaving what he had come to call the "Warmed-overland Monthly."

The papers he wrote for it are filled with pithy observations he was to put into practice as a writer. He lamented the fact he had never mastered poetry, for instance: "When I was in my twenties, I concluded one day that I was not a poet. It was the bitterest moment of my life." For the man who is renowned as "Bitter Bierce," that must have been a bitter moment indeed. In the last of the "Grizzly Papers," however, he observed that poetry disciplines the writer and rewards him with restraint and control: "... the passions, which burn with a lawless flame, and the imagination, which flies with a free wing ... find their largest liberty in confinement; in other words, these unruly qualities [are] best expressed in the measure and exact diction of verse." He concluded: "Why our most spontaneous and tumultuous feelings go voluntarily into harness is a very ... difficult question."

*The Overland Monthly* also carried Bierce's first published short story, "The Haunted Valley," a story compounded of passion and given imaginative wing in such lines as "... the highway dips into a sunless ravine which opens out on either side in a half-confidential manner, as if it had a secret to impart at some more convenient season. I never used to ride through it without first looking to the one side and then to the other, to see if the time had arrived for the revelation."

The asthma that would continue to plague him all his life drove him to take residence in San Rafael, north of the golden gate, where he enjoyed the literary company of such notables as Charles Warren Stoddard, Edward Rowland Sill and Joaquin Miller who had just returned from a giddy whirl in England with such Pre-Raphaelites as the Rossettis and Swinburne. Miller manipulated a meeting with Bierce whose "Town Crier" had been a frequent topic of conversation among the later Victorians. It seems they had developed their own passion for the cowboy shirts and muddy riding boots Miller affected at Ford Madox Brown's little soirees in Merrie Olde. Bierce fell under the spell of Miller's tales and, taking his wife of about ten weeks, he left for England.

Mary Ellen "Mollie" Day, the only daughter of a wealthy politician-miner, had brought music (she played the piano and sang) and money into Bierce's life. He could not otherwise have afforded the trip. With the talent for "bringing," Mollie may even

have brought mirth to Mark Twain, for Bierce had joyed in making light of that writer's marriage to a wealthy woman the previous year.

Then followed Bierce's "thousand days." He always considered them the best period of his life. With his father-in-law's money and his own good looks so like the stereotypical picture of the Englishman (six feet tall, high colored, handsome, blond of hair and mustache, grey of eye, and thirty) he cut a wide swath through London's local notables, Sir Henry Irving (Bram Stoker's employer) among them. He also consortied with the hordes of Americans there on vacation from the Gilded Age at home, some of them friends, others objects of his wit: Stoddard, Miller, even Twain who may have laughed a lot when Bierce consistently picked up the bar checks.

Editing and revising earlier works, Bierce published his first books in London: *The Fiend's Delight*, *Nuggets and Dust*, *Cobwebs from an Empty Skull*. Frequently turgid and bombastic, sometimes ungrammatical, they contain a few things to be admired, many to be enjoyed, some to be plagiarized: "The noblest pursuit of Man is the pursuit of Woman," for instance.

His own pursuit of Mollie was to occupy much of Bierce's life. Between her pregnancies, his asthma, and his mother-in-law's ministrations to her daughter who was usually accouchée or about to be, he was forced to shuffle the family from London to Bristol to Bath, from Hampstead to Paris to Leamington before Molly went back to San Francisco. In 1872, their son Day was born in Bristol. In April, 1874, their son Leigh was born in Leamington. Meanwhile, Bierce was grinding out material of little consequence for journals edited by his drinking buddies or subsidized by the widowed Empress Eugénie of France.

In 1875, Mollie, enceinte again, told Bierce she was going home for a visit. When he learned the real reason for the trip, he joined her in San Francisco in time for the birth of their third and last child, Helen.

And so ended his idyll. Henceforth, he had to get down to business and support the family. He could go into mining or real estate, or he could continue in journalism. His own contacts, his father-in-law's connections, his predilection for writing—all created ambivalences that, coupled with his residency in the Days' house, brought his asthma to a disturbing level. Moving his family into its own quarters alleviated but did not quell the attacks. Nor did

the deaths of his father and mother help matters. His chief conduit to them had been Albert, and Bierce's letters of condolence to his mother, who outlived her husband by two years, indicate a paralyzing guilt, a guilt that did not move him to visit her, however, in the remaining two years of her life.

Working in the Assay Office of the Branch Mint supplied household money for the next year. Bierce had decided to abandon journalism, had even so informed a friend. But the offer of an associate editorship on a newly-founded political magazine, the *Argonaut*, changed that plan. Various journalists of note contributed to the publication, but Bierce's column, "Prattle," was the most popular feature of the richly-endowed journal. At the same time, however, Bierce was drawing a *Map of the Black Hills Region, Showing the Gold Mining District and the Seat of the Indian War. Drawn by A. G. Bierce from Surveys Ordered by the War Department*. Published in 1877, it brought him an offer to go to Dakota Territory as general agent of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company. An elaborate tale of deceit and skulduggery occupies the next several years which cost Bierce a great deal of anguish and, ultimately, minimal court costs, though he neither brought charges nor was charged with anything. When the Supreme Court found against the plaintiff (nominally Bierce) and charged him \$400 costs, the lawyers who were bringing the case sought a retrial which they won. The defendant asked for a retrial and the Supreme Court upheld the plaintiff's case. After nine years, in 1889, Bierce paid the reduced costs: \$213.00.

Meanwhile, back at his real life, in 1881, Bierce became editor of the *San Francisco Wasp*, a weekly wherein he revitalized "Prattle" and began to publish the humorous definitions that would eventually become *The Devil's Dictionary*. The owner was an adamant waffler who at last found it easier to change ownership of the *Wasp* once than his mind one more time. When he sold the weekly, Bierce was back on the street, wheezing mightily.

Only epigrammatically, perhaps, did Bierce believe "The noblest pursuit of Man is the pursuit of Woman" or that success is "The one unpardonable sin against one's fellows." However, the next several years were to try him sorely in the first area, to reward him mightily in the second. Tensions had developed and were strengthened by Bierce's absence from his family as his asthma forced him to bicycle furiously (his prescription for good health) and head for the hills to live and work. Mollie, it seems, was left too much to her own

devices and amusements while Bierce became something of a reclusive workaholic, writing some of his most notable war stories (including the classic "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge") and finding publication for them in various magazines of short life and little distinction beyond his stories. At this time he was losing Mollie, but he was gaining William Randolph Hearst, who had gained the *San Francisco Examiner*, an inconsequential political newspaper, from his father. That worthy had become rich in gold and silver mining, aspired to politics, won a seat in the California senate, and, in an excess of elation, told his son to ask any gift he wished and it was his. William Randolph is reported to have answered unhesitatingly, "Give me *The Examiner*."

Young Hearst hotfooted it to San Francisco to assume control of the paper and to seek out Bierce as his first major staff appointee. Hearst's admiration for the asthmatic, momentary idler is further apparent in his agreement to allow Bierce to retain absolute editorial control of his "Prattle" column. Editors frequently handled copy cavalierly in spite of agreements, however, and, in the years that followed, when that happened, Bierce resigned. When that happened, Hearst lured him back until it happened again and the whole cycle started over. With such autonomy, Bierce waxed brilliant and became enormously influential throughout the West. That absolute control even allowed him to campaign in two mighty newspapers against the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Spanish-American War even though *The Examiner* in San Francisco and *The New York Journal* both supported that conflict which Bierce attacked with scathing wit on their editorial pages. (Hearst had bought *The Journal* in the opening round of his newspaper war with Joseph Pulitzer.)

Fearing—even predicting—America would become foolishly enamored of its growing power, Bierce unequivocally stated America would develop acquisitive land policies as a result of her great new-and-growing naval power and would, in time, probably incorporate the Philippines and Puerto Rico as well as (though it seemed impossible at the time) Hawaii. Without humor or cynicism, he solemnly announced his belief that an airborne bomb so powerful its "detonation will reverberate around the world" would one day clear the human chessboard of "the entire set of pawns and pieces."

Unfortunately, Bierce too was a pawn—to his own emotions. His psychosomatic asthma and intemperate jealousy first kept him away from Mollie and then lost her to him entirely. In 1888, briefly home from the hills, he discovered some letters Mollie had squirreled away.

And he read them—perhaps a petty reflection of his recorded views on liberty: "Nations are like individuals: some are worthy of liberty, others are not; and the same is true of peoples in relation to their rulers. When asked if I am not an advocate of liberty, I ask in my turn: 'Whose liberty to do what?'" He took the liberty to invade his wife's privacy and, like all invaders of that stripe, found a perfidy to match his own. The letters from a distinguished gentleman of the time professed an ardent though unrequited passion. Mollie's attempted explanation fell on deaf ears; and, unmollified, Bierce headed back to the hills and a separation from Mollie that lasted until their divorce in 1905.

The whole thing was as trite as the phrases required to report it, and, in the banal patterns of recurrence, Mollie died a couple of months later. Robert Browning's Duke of Ferrara explained his inability to forgive his last duchess: "E'en then would be some stooping, and I choose never to stoop." Bierce was as adamant as that arrogant aristocrat: In a letter written seven years after Mollie's death, Bierce said, "I never take part in any competition—not even for the favor of a woman."

Bierce's elder son, Day, was considerably less competitive—unfortunately. Incapable of living in the house divided against itself by love, he had, at sixteen, moved out and gone to Chico, California, only to find his own fatal triangle. In 1889, Day and his rival shot and killed each other in a duel over a girl.

Ill, emotionally spent, Bierce retreated into fiction again. From the discovery of Mollie's letters until the end of 1891, he wrote feverishly, frantically, fantastically. The short stories on which, primarily, rests his literary fame filled his creative hours and, perhaps, held his grief in check until he could once again manage it. He needed all his resources, certainly, for the literary enemies he had made with his journalistic sword came forward to taunt him in these dark days. The *Argonaut* established a new high in first amendment low. It accused Bierce of causing his son's death, a totally indefensible but completely indefeasible charge. Bierce would have irritated most of his colleagues and peers who were toadies to and trucklers of the kept press merely because he was associated with and admired by the dynamic William Randolph Hearst. His wit, uncompromising self-assurance, and superior writing ability moved them to all sorts of near-felonious attacks against him. Unfounded rumor, distorted truth, innuendo—all were weapons in the arsenals of the diffident who conspired to destroy his character and

his influence.

Simultaneously, he became the most admired contemporary wordsmith by other San Francisco area writers who made him their mentor and arbiter. He berated bad poets (of which there is never a dearth) but he encouraged and husbanded the talents of some beginners until they produced the fruits by which we know them. Gertrude Atherton and Edwin Markham were the most notable of the extensive group, though "The Man with the Hoe" elicited scathing criticism from Bierce even as other critics and reviewers praised it. Markham's ability to selectively accept criticism led him to overestimate his insight into economic and social problems as well as to distance himself from the man to whom his debt was greatest.

As aspiring writers made greater demands on Bierce's time, reviewers, critics, and readers were also asking for more of it. At least some of those people not only recognized the excellence of his work, they found him as good as anyone writing at the time. Atherton and H. L. Mencken recognized his singular ability, and Percival Pollard found him superior to Stephen Crane who had, himself, openly admired Bierce's short stories even though Bierce, before his own attack on Crane in the *Examiner*, called the author of *The Red Badge of Courage* "the Crane freak." And, even though Bierce's satiric verse remained a personal disappointment, it probably influenced Crane's which is Biercean to an observable degree.

In time, James Thurber's and Ernest Hemingway's considerable debt to Bierce manifested itself—a debt that would probably have pleased the man who almost fawned on only one group of people: those who expressed an admiration for his work without being rivals for public acclaim. He defined hatred as "A sentiment appropriate to the occasion of another's superiority."

Meanwhile, his two surviving children were keeping Bierce's emotions busy. His second son, Leigh, died in 1901, a death that brought Helen to New York where Bierce had been spending some time, though most of his time from 1896 had been spent in Washington where he lobbied for Hearst against the railroads. As he shuttled between Washington and New York and San Francisco, resigning and being re-hired by Hearst, Bierce had been publishing such collections of his work as *In the Midst of Life* and *Fantastic Fables*. From 1900 he was writing for the *New York Journal*, the *New York American* and the *San Francisco Examiner* and living in Washington where a close friend named Carrie Christiansen "did" for him as nurse, secretary, and woman of all trades except "that one"

though his final bequest leaving everything to her has caused the skeptical to look heavenward when her name is mentioned.

Helen was brought to bed with typhoid fever shortly after Leigh's funeral, an illness that so intensified Bierce's asthma that a dual funeral was not unthinkable. However, Helen recovered enough to marry the next year, a marriage that allowed Bierce to breathe easier and better until 1905 when Mollie's death laid him low enough to record, "Death has been striking pretty close to me again, and you know how that upsets a fellow." Such understatement is rare with Bierce.

One small beginning occupied the next year as Bierce became the critic for Hearst's *Cosmopolitan*. But it was quickly catastrophe time again as 1906 brought divorce to Helen and the devastating earthquake to Bierce's beloved San Francisco. Between attacks of asthma and hives, he was sure neither child nor city could rebuild. However, by 1907, Helen was married for the second time and San Francisco was rising from its ashes faster than the classical bird.

The Bierce-Hearst relationship had finally exhausted itself, and, in 1908, Bierce resigned one last time. Hearst magnanimously gave his old friend and employee reprint rights to everything Bierce had published in the Hearst holdings. Sixty-eight years old and free of deadlines, Bierce set about collecting his own works, a million words published in 1912. Never has anything needed editing more. The twelve volumes are like the basement of a museum before the exhibits are sorted out. Too expensive for subscribers, they were too chaotic for reviewers. They are, however, a complete record of the author's works and, with the Gordian Press duplicate reprint in 1966 making the set more affordable, they provide an exciting workshop for future hewers of tutorial wood in graduate English departments developing toothy little flattails.

Holidays in California did little to speed the work on his collection, nor did they bring Bierce peace of mind. He doubtless reminisced about the Warsaw walks, for he spent time with his brother Albert and his son and daughter-in-law Lora. Bierce found a willing listener in her as he detailed his dislike for the talentless bohemians of Carmel-by-the-Sea. With all the assurance literary giants possess, Bierce catalogued the trendy preoccupations he found to be the "false fool gods" of Californians: strange new religions (such as Christian Science), inevitable socialism and, perhaps hard on its heels, anarchism, decaying attitudes about sexual restraint, and women's suffrage.

Always fond of women generally, Bierce declared, "Woman would be more charming if one could fall into her arms without falling into her hands." Of suffrage generally: "Suffrage is the expression of opinion by means of a ballot. The right of suffrage (which is held to be both a privilege and a duty) means, as commonly interpreted, the right to vote for the man of another man's choice, and is highly prized." When suffrage gets out of hand, it leads to choosing mayors and presidents and who knows what. Normally we do not know how large numbers of people view specific men, but Bierce's definition of a president can be modified to apply to heads of cities as well as to heads of the country: "President, *n.* The leading figure in a small group of men of whom—and of whom only—it is positively known that immense numbers of their countrymen did not want any of them for president." What witticism might Bierce have had for a Carmel-by-the-Sea mayoral Dirty Harry or a head of state whose strange bedfellows include a Bonzo and a Bush? He just might have admired Bonzo, for he once observed, "Those who are horrified at Mr. Darwin's theory may comfort themselves with the assurance that, if we are descended from the ape, we have not descended so far as to preclude all hope of return." Bonzo's choice of bedfellows might have altered that assessment, however.

With the completion of his collected works, Bierce succumbed to nostalgia and began to plan a trip that would take him on a tour of the battlefields of his youth, then into South America. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, he felt, "How dull it is to pause, to make an end,/To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!" He who had once defined "Plan, *v.t.* To bother about the best method of accomplishing an accidental result," planned carefully. He transferred his cemetery lot to Helen with the disclaimer he did "not wish to lie there.... You will not be bothered about the mortal part of [signature] Your Daddy." Scarcely a comforting complimentary close to a letter or a life, it served its purpose passing well.

Later, he informed one correspondent, "I'd hate to die between sheets, and, God willing, I won't." To another, he spoke of his proposed trip: "My plan, so far as I have one, is to go through Mexico to one of the Pacific ports, if I can get through without being stood up against a wall and shot as an American. Thence I hope to sail to some port in South America. Thence go across the Andes.... Naturally, it is possible—even probable—that I shall not return. These be 'strange countries,' in which things happen; that is why I am going." How like the farewell of Tennyson's Ulysses that statement

is: "Tis not too late to seek a newer world./Push off, and sitting well in order smite/the sounding furrows; for my purpose holds/To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths/Of all the western stars, until I die./It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;/It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,/And see the great Achilles, whom we knew."

And so, in their own times, both old warriors set out on their final trips. And both disappeared forever—Ulysses without trace, Bierce leaving behind a detailed account—up to a point. From Washington in October, 1913, he toured the Civil War battles sites and came to New Orleans for an asthma stop. His next asthma layover was in San Antonio, Texas, and, by December, he had gone through Laredo, El Paso, and Juarez. His last letter, dated December 26, 1913, states his plan to go from Chihuahua to Ojinaga with Pancho Villa's forces the next day.

Ojinja fell on January 11, 1914, and the slain were piled and burned to prevent the spread of typhus. One officer recalled seeing Bierce going into the battle. Another reported hearing "an old gringo" had been killed in the fighting. No one saw Bierce after the battle, and much has been made of his "mysterious" disappearance.

Americans were not held in great affection by their southern neighbors—as Bierce had suggested in his letter; so, had the seventy-one year old man survived the chaotic Mexican revolutionary battle, the mystery would have been considerably greater. Still, many writers have tried to make the obvious seem the work of the Devil transmogrifying Bierce to work forever on revisions and expansions of his dictionary or an apotheosizing for equally arcane reasons.

When shrouding his death in speculation failed to remove attention from the man's life and works, they called him bitter, sadistic, cynical—the epitaphs applied to him by the victims of his wit, that satirical stiletto of which Bierce had noted, "Wit stabs, begs pardon—and turns the weapon in the wound." If he was a cynic, he was not the one defined by the English counterpart of this most excellent epigrammatist, Oscar Wilde: "A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." No, he was the cynic Ambrose Bierce himself defined: "A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be." Such perception makes one a blackguard, indeed, to one's enemies. By his own definition, he became a cynic in their tedious lexicons. When one can define oneself that well, he can rise above anything—even a Mexican battlefield.

# John Mortonson's Funeral

by AMBROSE BIERCE

Mourning did them no good.  
It did John Mortonson no good.  
But in the face of death  
both reason and philosophy are silent.

Rough notes of this tale were found among the papers of the late Leigh Bierce. It is printed here with such revision only as the author might himself have made in transcription.

John Mortonson was dead: his lines in "the tragedy 'Man'" had all been spoken and he had left the stage. The body rested in a fine mahogany coffin fitted with a plate of glass. All arrangements for the funeral had been so well attended to that had the deceased known he would doubtless have approved. The face, as it showed under the glass, was not disagreeable to look upon: it bore a faint smile, and as the death had been painless, had not been distorted beyond the repairing power of the undertaker. At two o'clock of the afternoon the friends were to assemble to pay their last tribute of respect to one who had no further need of friends and respect. The surviving members of the family came severally every few minutes to the casket and wept above the placid features beneath the glass. This did them no good; it did no good to John Mortonson; but in the presence of death reason and philosophy are silent.

As the hour of two approached the friends began to arrive and after offering such consolation to the stricken relatives as the proprieties of the occasion required, solemnly seated themselves about the room with an augmented consciousness of their importance

in the funeral. Then the minister acame, and in the overshadowing presense the lesser lights went into eclipse. His entrance was followed by that of the widow, whose lamentations filled the room. She approached the casket and after leaning her face against the cold glass for a moment was gently led to a seat near her daughter. Mournfully and low the man of God began his eulogy of the dead, and his doleful voice, mingled with the sobbing which it was its purpose to stimulate and sustain, rose and fell, seemed to come and go, like the sound of a sullen sea. The gloomy day grew darker as he spoke; a curtain of cloud underspread the sky and a few drops of rain fell audibly. It seemed as if all nature were weeping for John Mortonson.

When the minister had finished his eulogy with a prayer a hymn was sung and the pallbearers took their places beside the bier. As the last notes of the hymn died away the widow ran to the coffin, cast herself upon it and sobbed hysterically. Gradually, however, she yielded to dissuasion, becoming more composed; and as the minister was in the act of leading her away her eyes sought the face of the dead beneath the glass. She threw up her arms and with a shriek fell backward insensible.

The mourners sprang forward to the coffin, the friends followed, and as the clock on the mantel solemnly struck three all were staring down upon the face of John Mortonson, deceased.

They turned away, sick and faint. One man, trying in his terror to escape the awful sight, stumbled against the coffin so heavily as to knock away one of its frail supports. The coffin fell to the floor, the glass was shattered to bits by the concussion.

From the opening crawled John Mortonson's cat, which lazily leapt to the floor, sat up, tranquilly wiped its crimson muzzle with a forepaw, then walked with dignity from the room.

# The Middle Toe of the Right Foot

by AMBROSE BIERCE

In a fight like that—  
with knives in a pitch-black room—  
a fellow could *lose* something.

## I

It is well known that the old Manton house is haunted. In all the rural district near about, and even in the town of Marshall, a mile away, not one person of unbiased mind entertains a doubt of it; incredulity is confined to those opinionated persons who will be called "cranks" as soon as the useful word shall have penetrated the intellectual demesne of the *Marshall Advance*. The evidence that the house is haunted is of two kinds: the testimony of disinterested witnesses who have had ocular proof, and that of the house itself. The former may be disregarded and ruled out on any of the various grounds of objection which may be urged against it by the ingenious; but facts within the observation of all are material and controlling.

In the first place, the Manton house has been unoccupied by mortals for more than ten years, and with its outbuildings is slowly falling into decay—a circumstance which in itself the judicious will hardly venture to ignore. It stands a little way off the loneliest reach of the Marshall and Harriston road, in an opening which was once a farm and is still disfigured with strips of rotting fence and half covered with brambles overrunning a stony and sterile soil long unaquainted with the plow. The house itself is in tolerably good condition, though badly weather-stained and in dire need of attention from the glazier, the smaller male population of the region having attested in the manner of its kind its disapproval of dwelling without dwellers. It is two stories in height, nearly

square, its front pierced by a single doorway flanked on each side by a window boarded up to the very top. Corresponding windows above, not protected, serve to admit light and rain to the rooms of the upper floor. Grass and weeds grow pretty rankly all about, and a few shade trees, somewhat worse for wind, and leaning all in one direction, seem to be making a concerted effort to run away. In short, as the Marshall town humorist explained in the columns of the *Advance*, "the proposition that the Manton house is badly haunted is the only logical conclusion from the premises." The fact that in this dwelling Mr. Manton thought it expedient one night ten years ago to rise and cut the throats of his wife and two small children, removing at once to another part of the country, has no doubt done its share in directing public attention to the fitness of the place for supernatural phenomena.

To this house, one summer evening, came four men in a wagon. Three of them promptly alighted, and the one who had been driving hitched the team to the only remaining post of what had been a fence. The fourth remained seated in the wagon. "Come," said one of his companions, approaching him, while the others moved away in the direction of the dwelling—"this is the place."

The man addressed did not move. "By God!" he said harshly, "this is a trick, and it looks to me as if you were in it."

"Perhaps I am," the other said, looking him straight in the face and speaking in a tone which had something of contempt in it. "You will remember, however, that the choice of place was with your own assent left to the other side. Of course if you are afraid of spooks—"

"I am afraid of nothing," the man interrupted with another oath, and sprang to the ground. The two of them joined the others at the door, which one of them had already opened with some difficulty, caused by rust of lock and hinge. All entered. Inside it was dark, but the man who had unlocked the door produced a candle and matches and made a light. He then unlocked a door on their right as they stood in the passage. This gave them entrance to a large, square room that the candle but dimly lighted. The floor had a thick carpeting of dust, which partly muffled their footfalls. Cobwebs were in the angles of the walls and depended from the ceiling like strips of rotting lace, making undulatory movements in the disturbed air. The room had two windows in adjoining sides, but from neither could anything be seen except the rough inner surfaces of boards a few inches from the glass. There was no fireplace, no furniture; there was nothing: besides

the cobwebs and the dust, the four men were the only objects there which were not a part of the structure.

Strange enough they looked in the yellow light of the candle. The one who had so reluctantly alighted was especially spectacular—he might have been called sensational. He was of middle age, heavily built, deep chested and broad shouldered. Looking at his figure, one would have said that he had a giant's strength; at his features, that he would use it like a giant. He was clean shaven, his hair rather closely cropped and grey. His low forehead was seamed with wrinkles above the eyes, and over the nose these became vertical. The heavy black brows followed the same law, saved from meeting only by an upward turn at what would otherwise have been the point of contact. Deeply sunken beneath these glowed in the obscure light a pair of eyes of uncertain color, but obviously enough too small. There was something forbidding in the expression, which was not bettered by the cruel mouth and wide jaw. The nose was well enough, as noses go; one does not expect much of noses. All that was sinister in the man's face seemed accentuated by an unnatural pallor—he appeared altogether bloodless.

The appearance of the other men was sufficiently commonplace: they were such persons as one meets and forgets that he met. All were younger than the man described, between whom and the eldest of the others, who stood apart, there was apparently no feeling. They avoided looking at each other.

"Gentlemen," said the man holding the candle and the keys, "I believe everything is right. Are you ready, Mr. Rosser?"

The man standing apart from the group bowed and smiled.

"And you, Mr. Grossmith?"

The heavy man bowed and scowled.

"You will have to remove your outer clothing."

Their hats, coats, waistcoats and neckwear were soon removed and thrown outside the door, in the passage. The man with the candle now nodded, and the fourth man—he who had urged Grossmith to leave the wagon—produced from the pocket of his overcoat two long, murderous-looking bowie knives, which he drew now from their leather scabbards.

"They are exactly alike," he said, presenting one to each of the two principles—for by this time the dullest observer would have understood the nature of this meeting. It was to be a duel to the death.

Each contestant took a knife, examined it critically near the candle and tested the strength of the blade and handle across his lifted knee. Their persons were then searched in turn, each by the second of the other.

"If it is agreeable to you, Mr. Grossmith," said the man holding the light, "you will place yourself in that corner."

He indicated the angle of the room farthest from the door, whither Grossmith retired, his second parting from him with a grasp of the hand which had nothing of cordiality in it. In the angle nearest the door, Mr. Rosser stationed himself, and after a whispered consultation his second left him, joining the other near the door. At that moment the candle was suddenly extinguished, leaving all in profound darkness. This may have been done by a draught from the opened door; whatever the cause, the effect was startling.

"Gentlemen," said a voice which sounded strangely unfamiliar in the altered condition affecting the relations of the senses—"gentlemen, you will not move until you hear the closing of the outer door."

A sound of trampling ensued, then the closing of the inner door; and finally the outer one closed with a concussion which shook the entire building.

A few minutes afterward a belated farmer's boy met a light wagon which was being driven furiously toward the town of Marshall. He declared that behind the two figures on the front seat stood a third, with its hands upon the bowed shoulders of the others, who appeared to struggle vainly to free themselves from its grasp. This figure, unlike the others, was clad in white, and had undoubtedly boarded the wagon as it passed the haunted house. As this lad could boast a considerable former experience with the supernatural thereabouts his word had the weight justly due in the testimony of an expert. The story (in connection with the next day's events) eventually appeared in the *Advance*, with some slight literary embellishments and a concluding intimation that the gentlemen referred to would be allowed the use of the paper's columns for their version of the night's adventures. But the privilege remained without a claimant.

## II

The events that led up to this "duel in the dark" were simple enough. One evening three young men of the town of Marshall

were sitting in a quiet corner of the porch of the village hotel, smoking and discussing such matters as three educated young men of a Southern village would naturally find interesting. Their names were King, Sancher, and Rosser. At a little distance, within easy hearing, but taking no part in the conversation, sat a fourth. He was a stranger to the others. They merely knew that on his arrival by the stage-coach that afternoon he had written in the hotel register the name Robert Grossmith. He had not been observed to speak to anyone except the hotel clerk. He seemed, indeed, singularly fond of his own company—or, as the *personnel* of the *Advance* expressed it, "grossly addicted to evil associations." But then it should be said in justice to the stranger that the *personnel* was himself of a too convivial disposition fairly to judge one differently gifted, and had, moreover, experienced a slight rebuff in an effort at an "interview."

"I hate any kind of deformity in a woman," said King, "whether natural or—acquired. I have a theory that any physical defect has its correlative mental and moral defect."

"I infer then," said Rosser, gravely, "that a lady lacking the normal advantage of a nose would find the struggle to become Mrs. King an arduous enterprise."

"Of course you may put it that way," was the reply; "but seriously, I once threw over a most charming girl on learning quite accidentally that she had suffered amputation of a toe. My conduct was brutal if you like, but if I had married that girl I should have been miserable for life and should have made her so."

"Whereas," said Sancher, with a light laugh, "by marrying a gentleman of more liberal views she escaped with a parted throat."

"Ah, you know to whom I refer. Yes, she married Manton, but I don't know about his liberality; I'm not sure but he cut her throat because he discovered that she lacked the excellent thing in woman: the middle toe of the right foot."

"Look at that chap!" said Rosser in a low voice, his eyes fixed upon the stranger.

That chap was obviously listening intently to the conversation.

"Damn his impudence!" muttered King—"what ought we do?"

"That's an easy one," Rosser replied, rising. "Sir," he continued, addressing the stranger, "I think it would be better if you would remove your chair to the other end of the veranda. The

presence of gentlemen is evidently an unfamiliar situation to you."

The man sprang to his feet and strode forward with clenched hands, his face white with rage. All were now standing. Sancher stepped between the belligerents.

"You are hasty and unjust," he said to Rosser; "this gentleman has done nothing to deserve such language."

But Rosser would not withdraw a word. By the custom of the country and the time there could be but one outcome to the quarrel.

"I demand the satisfaction due to a gentleman," said the stranger, who had become more calm. "I have not an acquaintance in this region. Perhaps you, sir," bowing to Sancher, "will be kind enough to represent me in this matter."

Sancher accepted the trust — somewhat reluctantly it must be confessed, for the man's appearance and manner were not at all to his liking. King, who during the colloquy had hardly removed his eyes from the stranger's face and had not spoken a word, consented with a nod to act for Rosser, and the upshot of it was that, the principals having retired, a meeting was arranged for the next evening. The nature of the arrangements had already been disclosed. The duel with knives in a dark room was once a commoner feature of Southwestern life than it is likely to be again. How thin a veneering of "chivalry" covered the essential brutality of the code under which such encounters were possible we shall see.

### III

In the blaze of a midsummer noonday the old Manton house was hardly true to its traditions. It was of the earth, earthy. The sunshine caressed it warmly and affectionately, with evident disregard of its bad reputation. The grass greening all the expanse in its front seemed to grow, not rankly, but with a natural and joyous exuberance, and the weeds blossomed quite like plants. Full of charming lights and shadows and populous with pleasant-voiced birds, the neglected shade trees no longer struggled to run away, but bent reverently beneath their burdens of sun and song. Even in the glassless upper windows was an expression of peace and contentment, due to the light within. Over the stony fields the visible heat danced with a lively tremor incompatible with the gravity which is an attribute of the supernatural.

Such was the aspect under which the place presented itself to Sheriff Adams and two other men who had come out from

Marshall to look at it. One of these men was Mr. King, the sheriff's deputy; the other, whose name was Brewer, was a brother of the late Mrs. Manton. Under a beneficent law of the State relating to property which has been for a certain period abandoned by an owner whose residence cannot be ascertained, the sheriff was legal custodian of the Manton farm and appurtenances thereunto belonging. His present visit was in mere perfunctory compliance with some order of a court in which Mr. Brewer had an action to get possession of the property as heir to his deceased sister. By a mere coincidence, the visit was made on the day after the night that Deputy King had unlocked the house for another and very different purpose. His presence now was not of his own choosing: he had been ordered to accompany his superior and at the moment could think of nothing more prudent than simulated alacrity in obedience to the command.

Carelessly opening the front door, which to his surprise was not locked, the sheriff was amazed to see, lying on the floor of the passage into which it opened, a confused heap of men's apparel. Examination showed it to consist of two hats, and the same number of coats, waistcoats and scarves, all in a remarkably good state of preservation, albeit somewhat defiled by the dust in which they lay. Mr. Brewer was equally astonished, but Mr. King's emotion is not of record. With a new and lively interest in his own actions the sheriff now unlatched and pushed open a door on the right, and the three entered. The room was apparently vacant—no; as their eyes became accustomed to the dimmer light something was visible in the farthest angle of the wall. It was a human figure—that of a man crouching close in the corner. Something in the attitude made the intruders halt when they had barely crossed the threshold. The figure more and more clearly defined itself. The man was upon one knee, his back in the angle of the wall, his shoulders elevated to the level of his ears, his hands before his face, palms outward, his fingers spread and crooked like claws; the white face turned upward on the retracted neck had an expression of unutterable fright, the mouth half open, the eyes incredibly expanded. He was stone dead. Yet, with the exception of the bowie-knife, which had evidently fallen from his own hand, not another object was in the room.

In thick dust that covered the floor were some confused footprints near the door and along the wall through which it opened. Along one of the adjoining walls, too, past the boarded-up

windows, was the trail made by the man himself in reaching his corner. Instinctively in approaching the body the three men followed that trail. The sheriff grasped one of the outhrown arms; it was as rigid as iron, and the application of a gentle force rocked the entire body without altering the relation of its parts. Brewer, pale with excitement, gazed intently into the distorted face. "God of mercy!" he suddenly cried, "it is Manton!"

"You are right," said King, with an evident attempt at calmness: "I knew Manton. He then wore a full beard and his hair long, but this is he."

He might have added: "I recognized him when he challenged Rosser and Sancher, who he was before we played him this horrible trick. When Rosser left this dark room at our heels, forgetting his outer clothing in the excitement, and driving away with us in his shirt sleeves—all through the discreditable proceedings we knew whom we were dealing with, murderer and coward that he was!"

But nothing of this did Mr. King say. With his better light he was trying to penetrate the mystery of the man's death. That he had not once moved from the corner where he had been stationed; that his posture was that of neither attack or defense; that he had dropped his weapon; that he had obviously perished of sheer horror of something that he *saw*—these were circumstances which Mr. King's disturbed intelligence could not rightly comprehend.

Groping in intellectual darkness for a clew to his maze of doubt, his gaze, directed mechanically downward in the way of one who ponders momentous matters, fell upon something which, there in the light of day, and in the presence of living companions, affected him with terror. In the dust of years that lay thick upon the floor—leading from the door by which they had entered, straight across the room to within a yard of Manton's crouching corpse—were three parallel lines of footprints—light but definite impressions of bare feet, the outer ones those of small children, the inner a woman's. From the point at which they ended they did not return; they pointed all one way. Brewer, who had observed them at the same moment, was leaning forward in an attitude of rapt attention, horribly pale.

"Look at that!" he cried, pointing with both hands at the nearest print of the woman's right foot, where she had apparently stopped and stood. "The middle toe is missing—it was Gertrude!"

Gertrude was the late Mrs. Manton, sister to Mr. Brewer.

# THE NIGHT SEASONS

by J. N. WILLIAMSON

Terror spread through the jail  
like a tangible thing.  
Stark, uncontrollable terror.

Part III of IV

### III

"I have lived with shades, a shade;  
I am hung with graveyard flowers."

—Dorothy Parker  
*Rainy Night*

#### 1. Entomogenic Histoplasmosis: Raising It for Profit

**N**oble Ellair clasped his hands and leaned over his desk to me. His receding hairline, wide forehead, and almost lipless mouth turned him skull-like because he'd put his face next to his emergency lamp. He always kept the expression in his eyes veiled, I decided; if he ever experienced lust for any woman, she'd probably think he was about to diagnose her as anal-repressive.

"What do you think," he asked softly, conversationally, "has happened here?"

"I think that people are dying." He looked disappointed so I added, bobbing my head. "Hideously."

"You hadn't struck me as an evasive man."

"I think," I started fresh, "that people are dying hideously here—because of your plants." I folded my hands, too, shrugged. "But I can't figure out how it works."

"Ah. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers?*" A brow shot up. "That kind of thing, Mr. Stenvall?"

"I don't know what kind. Not yet." I stopped. I'd started to go dangerously too far. If Ellair was dangerous, that is.

"So. Am I an alien body snatcher or a mad professor from

the late show? Your fantasies intrigue me."

I stalled an answer. The truth was, without clearcut evidence of Ellair's culpability, a reasonable conclusion might be my own paranoia. "If you brought all these plants here for the reasons you gave me yesterday, and it's their peculiarity at fault, you may be guilty of nothing more than poor judgment." I hated it that his preference for logic was making me defensive. "Same kind of lousy judgment a drunk displays when he orders the next drink. No worse than that, I guess."

When he shifted in his chair, a shoulder beamed the battery-operated lamp toward my face. He didn't move it. "Your forgiveness, your pardon, touches me deeply. Next question."

"Why did you ask me to ask the inmates about the plants? What's wrong with the air conditioning? Where'd you put the bodies? You bury them already?"

He had already read my untranscribed, unedited notes while I sat across the desk, waiting. He rifled through them with his thumb, paused, glanced up. "The correct and customary procedures have been observed, Mr. Stenvall." He arose, went to the drapes at the window, parted them. They were barred, too, and that fascinated me. It made it harder to distinguish the inmates from the keepers. But he used a cranking device, the window raised a few grudging inches, and even that much fresh air coming in was a blessing. "You are that rare prisoner who can communicate effectively, and you have the ears of your fellows. This Race Alyear, for example."

"Alyear is no 'fellow' of mine," I snapped. His remark pricked, but not just because of the mention of Alyear. Aside from the fact that I scarcely ever say what I really want to say to my wife and kids, I'd never accepted the high-handed notion that folks did not or could not communicate. It was more a case, I thought, of ordinary people thinking miserably on their feet, not realizing they'd been used or attacked until later. It also bothered me, looking at the unconcerned Ellair, that men like him assumed a punch in the mouth never qualified as communication, or social comment. I loathed knowing that he was probably right, because I ached to strike him. I really did.

"By the time you have spoken with a working sample of inmates," he continued as if I hadn't spoken, resuming his seat, "I expect to have the support my program requires to expand to other institutions." He smiled and it looked genuine enough.



"Mr. Stenvall, the public regards scientists today in a dichotomous manner otherwise reserved for the divinity: a love/hate relationship, as it were." He paused. "I'm going to take you deeper into my confidence, sir. To the extent that I'm conducting an experiment, I am not a stodgy, conservative, timid scientist but the sort who quests openly for the truth. You see, Stenvall, I believe that there is progress to be made by casting aside numerous assumptions; by wandering, wide-eyed, into original realms of exploration; by going—"

"Where no man's gone before?" I thought of the promise made by Captain Kirk at the beginning of the *Star Trek* episodes, but I meant to be sarcastic, belittling.

"Precisely!" Ellair said, beaming at me. "You do have a flair for words, Mr. Stenvall! And you are obviously bright enough to perceive that we can't have *panic* in this place. People get *hurt* in conditions of panic; inmates as well as ... others." He glanced down at my notes. "The black, Lakens, said I was 'like Santa Claus' to him. Alyear also responded well, saw potential merit in what I'm trying to do. Two men from different walks of life, and crime, clearly approving my plan."

"Dee Dee was a junkie trying to keep the Man off his back," I replied grimly. "There was already enough of his posterior taken up by the monkey. Alyear is *pus with feet!*"

"Neither man disapproved!" His brow raised, asking me to concede the point.

"The goddamned crooked banker disapproved! Is that why he died first?"

"But you learned, Stenvall—you *improved* your techniques after interviewing him." He'd ignored my question again. "Don't you understand yet? You discovered how to phrase a question to get the desired answer. And we *need* that kind of communication skill now. To avoid self-destructive panic."

I tried to recall the way I'd approached Blackledge and the others, but Ellair, a master of obfuscation, was confusing me. "You want me to calm them all down?" I asked. My shirt was sticking to my whole torso like greasy skin. "Tell them not to be afraid? Only after I know what's going on, Doctor—only then!" And I stopped talking, hoping I wasn't following Ellair's mental script like an ignorant Pavlovian pet.

Finally, to my surprise, Ellair uttered one word: "Fungi," he said. My eyes widened. "The crap growing out of Lou Vick's mouth—

Blackledge's ears—that was a *fungus*?"

Ellair spread his hands. "Since I didn't want this, didn't *plan* it, I can tell you only that it's the sole explanation that fits the facts. And here's why you can calm the other prisoners without feeling you've sold out: before the latest two men died I'd already spoken with both the mayor's and the governor's offices. You're all being moved to another facility, tomorrow. You, personally, are going home."

My mouth must've dropped open. I remembered an old college quip and some guy holding his nose: *There's fungus among us*. But my personal freedom, just the promise of it, blunted both my curiosity and anger. "I guess that will take care of it."

"Absolutely, when the plants are called back." His remark churned me up again, made me wonder if I'd been misinformed in assuming that fungus might have been gross but was basically harmless to people. "While you proceed with your survey, Mr. Stenvall, I will arrange for the guards to retrieve my gifts." His sad expression mourned the rejection of his plants. "It cannot possibly be all my gifts at fault, but we mustn't take any further chances. Don't you agree?"

I did and abruptly felt a kinship for the man. We were both human; each of us had made mistakes. "Can you tell me what went wrong? I don't entirely grasp all that's happened."

He made an honest effort to keep from looking at me with his old condescension. "Permit me to refresh your memory, Stenvall. Fungus becomes parasitic only when it dines on *living* matter. They're *rusts* or *smuts* at that point."

"Which of them bring diseases to man?" I demanded.

"And munch away inside him?" Ellair asked with a cocked brow. "They have several names. Ringworm, for one. Athlete's foot for another." The nettling attitude fell away suddenly. "I begin to believe that the . . . problem . . . confounding us may be connected to something rather intriguing which has afflicted the . . . ah . . . ancestors of these little beauties of mine. While it has only affected insects heretofore, it's possible—just remotely possible—that my special cultivation . . ."

Ellair's voice faded and he turned his head from me, apparently in deep thought. He seemed so genuinely concerned, then, that more of my own antagonism dissipated. Dimly, I remembered reading about infections of the lymph nodes called "*histoplasmosis*" and saw that we'd underrated the potential of—

"*Entomogenic*," Noble Ellair said, and caught his breath. "Yes, the similarities of attack are marked." He decided something and looked at me with a completely unreadable expression that made my heart begin to beat more quickly. "While I did *not* consciously experiment with the kind of fungus that germinates and grows from the bodies of insects, the attacks *are* quite similar." While he seemed dreamy at a glance, I sensed the way his mind was racing; calculating. "It appears something quite extraordinary has happened to my plants, Stenvall."

I cleared my throat. "How?"

"Fifty thousand species of fungus have been identified. We know of more than two-hundred and fifty other types." His eyelids batted. "Even before the research conducted by Perry in the rain forests, we had scientifically described a fungus that secretes an astoundingly sticky substance it uses to capture much bigger creatures. We know that it evolved, Mr. Stenvall."

"How?" I wanted to know.

Ellair rose and closed the window. "To the extent of devising a tube it attaches to the larger creature's body. It uses the tube, I think, to suck out its ... ah ... food."

*But you're talking about an insect's insides*, I thought.

"It seems," Ellair continued before I could speak, "that more than one evolved variety of the entomogenic fungus worked its way into my plants and ... chose to travel."

"Chose?" I repeated. My skin was starting to crawl and I had to rub the inside of one arm. "It *planned* to travel?"

Ellair fell silent, and ruminative. But not, I imagined, as upset or displeased as before. "Volitional intent seems a bit much. But I think it's safe to say that the entomogenic has, well, crossed the line." He nodded decisively.

Heat moved over my body in waves. "Crossed *what* line?" I demanded.

Ellair hesitated. He went to his door, unlocked it and then held it for me to precede him. I felt his gaze, steadier now, on my face as I passed him. There was something tense there, electric, and I wondered if the prospect of killing us with his plants was exciting Noble Ellair.

Then we were out in the ill-lit corridor above the cells and his mood had altered—or he'd controlled it. "Central American folklore holds that my plants have a calming, even a tranquilizing effect. My motivations were honorable, Stenvall. The line I said the

evolved fungus has crossed?" He'd decided, I realized, to confide farther in me, but I hadn't come close to anticipating what he was going to say. His words positively chilled me. "It's the line between parasite—and *predator*."

I stopped walking, shaken. But he clapped my shoulder, headed us back down the corridor. A mutter of frightened male voices rose beneath us like the murmurs from a collective grave. Yet my outlook on Ellair shifted again, remembering he had arranged for the inmates to be moved—and for me to go home.

We had neared the stairs leading back to the cellblock, our footsteps quiet and strangely hollow, when I realized that tomorrow was many hours from now, that anything could happen with so many terrified men unable to flee a horror they did not comprehend ... and that the jail would be without light tonight.

We trotted down the steps and Ellair turned back to me, conversational. "I see that chap Crock as a potential troublemaker."

I told him I agreed. Should Crock feel his own life was threatened, he might do anything at all to escape. The realization that we'd have to make it through the night in darkness left me only partly satisfied with Ellair's explanation. I glanced curiously at his peculiar profile. Wasn't it very convenient for a steaming day to become worse when the air conditioner went out and for the generator that restored it to collapse? Somewhere I'd heard that fungus spores were released by suddenly mercurial and humid conditions. It might seem crazy to believe that a doctor—a psychiatrist—would willfully endanger the lives of nine hundred fellow men, yet I'd sensed Ellair's acceptance of his vast superiority, knew from experience that certain people not only believe they are better than other people but enjoy acting out their assumptions.

Mentioning panic again, he finally extracted my reluctant pledge to play down the hazards of the plants and say nothing about the fungus; to mention "bugs," merely that, if pressed.

He went on reciting the names of men on the floor in the drunk tank, whom I might know, suggesting that I interview this or that man. I scarcely heard him. The realization that there were dozens of other cells on other floors was a shock to me. Sure, I'd known it; psychiatric types, potential suicides, witnesses, and informers—not to mention the whole women's wing—were also incarcerated there. But the thing was, I had only worried about those inmates I saw with my own eyes, passing to and from the tank. We were like hundreds of human beings marooned in a high-

rise of layered islands. Since Ellair had bestowed his flowery gifts on us all, there was no way to know how many other people had died—women as well as men. People who were becoming hysterical because they didn't know what was happening or when the horror might select any one of them; almost a thousand of us crammed into little barred spaces with no way to escape and nothing to do but wait and see who'd be chosen next. And night was coming. Darkness, in an immense, echoing palace of pain. Night and darkness, when the American *Zeitgeist* expected evil.

They didn't deserve this. Maybe two hundred were society's discards, I guess, rejected because they had rejected the rest of us. But hundreds more (whether Ellair and people like him wanted to look at it that way or not) were men and women who had already lost damn near everything important (from ignorance or inexperience passed along from generation to generation) and strayed from a mainstream they'd be overjoyed to return to, if they knew how. Men or women like Lou Vick, who truly could not pay what they owed—whose lifelong squalid unAmerican goddamn poverty or nervous fury or inability to ask questions and explain, or filth and repellent bodies or faces and crude antisocial illiterate fucking inclinations—had landed them in the slammer. And—this was the point I yearned to explain to Noble Ellair—*some of them would never be back here!* Some of them—hell, *us!*—were shocked into awareness, taught a lesson, just the way the system was once supposed to do it. Not many, but *some* of us would raise our kids differently, *better*, work out our marital or vocational or in-law problems, educate ourselves, turn over a new leaf and find the path to decent, responsible life as human beings, instead of the sluglike shadow life we'd found before when we sought a new direction.

When we stepped out on my floor, I remembered scared, silly Lew and Jimmie. As Gargan, recognizing Ellair, waved us by, I asked Ellair, "Are you aware that the guys with Blackledge when he died have been kept in deadlock all day?"

Not that I wanted to get old Gargan in hot water, but the gamblers, I saw, could be in far worse trouble. Everyone had forgotten they existed and they'd been locked up in a fully isolated, unsanitary box of a room which was surely one scorching pisser in that heat, so I just didn't give a shit then about the aging guard or his pension. Ellair wanted to know why, including Gargan in his questions, what they had done to be given the county jail's worst

punishment. I supported the resentful Gargan while he tried haltingly to explain that both men had *preferred* deadlock to the cell in which Blackledge had suffered and died shockingly before their eyes.

To his credit, a tightlipped Ellair snatched the keys from the old Irishman and led the way to deadlock at a run.

Odd, how inmates across from the isolation cell stopped gripping and shouting while they watched us getting it unlocked. There were sounds of confusion, misunderstanding; I overheard Hawaiian Eddie say we'd found out the gamblers "done all this shit." People always wanted to pin the blame, as if identifying the culprit made the bad crap go away. Well, it took more than a single key to open the nightmarish little space. Some cells are constructed with one prisoner in mind; a few, mostly in the women's wing—Delta Tri Truncheon—are actually dormitories.

Deadlock was made for one man, maybe a midget. I'd seen inside it once—not as an inmate, since alkies rarely were punished so severely—and I knew that the rest of the jail was prettied-up every ten years whether it needed it or not, but that deadlock was always left untouched.

So stench hit me when Ellair finally pulled the door open, but it wasn't only because of the cell's tight quarters. For a moment, I thought the gamblers had locked arms in a last embrace, as if knowing death was coming and wanting to make up.

It wasn't that way, however, not by a long sight. A really *awful* sight.

Away from the somewhat cooler and more ventilated air of the greater cellblock, the fungus had virtually eaten the men alive. Presumably, they had been penetrated by the same detonation of spores that killed Stephen Blackledge; I recalled then how he'd smashed his plant to smithereens. I said nothing, but suffered a feeling of supernatural anxiety. Some of the spiky substance Al Calderone had mistaken for horns when it sprouted from Blackledge and out of Lou Vick's ruined throat was in evidence. But either the fungus was a goddamn shapechanger, or there were *different varieties* of the peculiarly evolved fungi ...

When the gamblers were moved from deadlock, the inmates across the way caught their breaths. Something distinctly eerie foreshortened the space, transcended it, and became rooted in all our hearts. The gamblers' growths had merged in a blossoming that reminded me of gigantic cabbage leaves. Redness filtered through

them as if the plants had been running tests. Tiny, hot-red spiders which moved at unbelievable speeds came squeezing out from beneath the bodies. There was so much of the pulpy growth that I couldn't tell from what orifices in the gamblers' anatomies the spores had grown. When old Gargan put out a shaky finger to tap one of the enfolding flaps of fungus, it came up from Jimmie's partly concealed face like the wing of a creature feeding. Pale, quiet, Gargan stepped back and trembled.

Reflex, I thought. Hoped, maybe. Then I saw what seemed to be a deeply veined root springing up from Jimmie's left nostril and detected motion. The fungus had continued to grow. It was alive.

"Well, that's it." Ellair said it to no one special. Then he turned his scrawny neck to peer directly at me. Amazingly, he seemed relieved; cheery. "This makes your task harder, I realize. But make it clear to the men that this changes nothing." *Except Lew's and Jimmie's lives*, I thought, pissed. "This mess occurred hours ago. It's entirely irrelevant to the present, and to the other inmates' future."

I hated his goddamn attitude but saw his point, even nodded.

However, the events transpiring shortly after that proved Noble Ellair grotesquely wrong. Word spread fast from those who'd seen the bodies—seemingly devoured by Saran Wrap—to cell after cell. A clamor sprung up instantly as inmate after inmate begged or demanded to be let out, released—or moved *now*. Down the corridor I saw Doc, my pal, staring disgustedly at Calderone. Al was bounding all over the drunk tank, alternately screaming for his own salvation and calling down thunder and lightning—or God knows what from Hades. I heard him shriek—*"They're comin' right UP!"*—and, for some reason, it unnerved me a little.

What unnerved me a lot was the sudden sound which pierced all the others like a drill through a rotted tooth—from the cell containing Crock, Andre August, and Lester Percy.

Lester, the woeful little gay who'd always wanted the pimp, Crock, to take him as one of his hookers—a *female* hooker—seemed to be stuck midway between an arcing, gasping scream and something else issuing from his nose. It was as if he'd tried to sniff salt water and found it contained acid. Yet nothing else was wrong with him at the moment, aside from his expression. What frightened him was what he was seeing: Andre August.

Whether Lester'd craved Andre sexually or not, I didn't know. I knew that the rangy, muscular Crock had hinted that he hankered

for August and that even the white, sadistic Crock had had enough self-control not to tell August how he felt. He might have had his back broken by the massive black addict. I saw that Crock was also eyeballing August, lounging on his bunk with his arms folded, looking as if watching a television rerun.

My reaction was stronger. One look at Andre informed me that he'd not be using drugs again. All the big fellow had ahead of him was dying, in agony. Exquisite, silent agony.

I saw first what was happening to his ears. *Stuff* was bursting out of them as it had from Stephen Blackledge, fairly rolling out. But that was just the start.

Huge pustules had begun rising out of the numerous needle punctures—heroin tracks—along his inner arms and great biceps. They were probably what'd set frail little Lester off and left sociopathic Crock to watch with cold interest. Considering Crock's yen for Andre, this seemed to me to measure his own absence of humanity. All others who could see August had fallen helplessly still, almost as though Andre were already dead and we were paying our respects. One by one, the locked-up inmates who could not directly see the dying had lapsed into speechlessness, or were numbly asking questions, directed mainly to God. Their alert, terrified faces twisted and turned to stare from cells up and down the corridor, mutely inquiring of us who could see Andre how his death was going. Till you've seen hundreds of jail inmates fall into stunned silence, you haven't witnessed a crowd's capacity for mutual horror. Add to all that the shadows beginning to thicken in the corridor like corpse stains yet to take form there; add the relentless humidity.

Presumably Andre'd felt the growths coming out, forcing their way through his huge body like a street gang plundering its way through a rundown tenement. He had thrown his powerful arms out from his body as far as they'd go and now, standing, part scarecrow and part Christ, he seemed hypnotized by the sight of the growths emerging from his enlarged pores and the needle scars that ran from wrist to shoulder. Yet another image that came ridiculously to my mind; that of the proud slave, Joe, in *Showboat*. With his shirt torn open and arms raised, he looked ready to sing "Old Man River" in a grandly moving bass-baritone. What was happening to his ears Andre did not seem to notice or care; his only focus of attention was the arms he believed the Lord had given him to break tackles but which he had used as

receptacles for heroin. Colorless, twitching mushroom-things now drooped from his great arms like some alien fur, weighing them down, beginning to drag and to flap and sap the energy, the life-force, from his whole body. But the burgeoning tissue didn't merely grow or hang but, as it oozed out of the poor man's arms and ears, uncannily moved toward the other emerging fungus, as if to commune with it.

No sound came from the dying black.

Ellair got into the cell with him, tried to help. When I saw Crock, all but bored, rising idly from his bunk, I startled myself by reaching out and slamming the cell gate shut. We had enough trouble without human monsters attempting to escape. Whether Crock saw who'd locked the cell I didn't notice, because I was beginning to come unglued from staring at Andre's awful dying and, perhaps more, from the hoarsely whispered, frightening noises starting to become audible. They came from most of the floor's inmates and they formed a collective commentary of imprisoned people who had no choice but to believe themselves in the midst of some unguessable nightmare symbol of the Unknown. Al Calderone's high-pitched southern-Indiana tones filtered through the inmate sounds like Liquid Plumber down a coarse and greasy drain: "I tried t' tell 'em, Jesus," and, "They comin'! They coming now!" Then, gradually, while Dr. Ellair waited for a guard to bring his medical bag, while Andre slowly sank to the cell floor, the prisoners' voices became a single, rasping chant; a prayer perhaps—to forces and to powers they had never believed in before unless they were asleep and all their dreams had gone mad.

"It's plain eating him," ol' Gargan said under his breath, frozen in helplessness as we all were. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the sonofabitch is *eating* the poor peckerhead!"

Gargan wasn't far wrong, I thought. Despite the way Andre struggled to keep his powerful arms raised and functioning, the sheer weight and mass steadily drove him toward the cell floor. The pale, spiky tendrils piercing his ears did not become devil's horns but worked their way assiduously down his back, twitching, sending out new, suckering growths—like lips—that first kissed his spine, then bit deeply into it. Ellair and I caught our breaths, reached out to the suckers, strove to pluck or pinch them away, but they were astonishingly sticky and they stank; and after the one time I pried one of them out of Andre's red-on-black flesh, the thing puckered itself against the nearest skin it could reach—my

groin; I was kneeling beside August—and I fell over backward, feeling as if I'd been burned, nauseated and scared and furiously swearing. The pain was surely intolerable for any man with a lesser constitution, but Andre fought it back with only one strained noise emanating from him: *Hsst . . . Hsst . . .*

Then it ended with merciful but shocking abruptness. After throwing his bulbous big arms into the air in one last effort, August pitched forward on his face and all that appeared left of the big man was the steady writhing of fungi down his spine, and a nearly inaudible chewing noise as the pasty roiling husks on his arms—folded about him when he'd slumped forward—began a new attack upon his unprotected belly and between his massive legs.

## 2. The Mechanical Bastard

"We must talk," I told Noble Ellair. "Now."

We gave me a who-do-you-think-you're-talking-to look. But he saw I had the answer and still needed my cooperation. That was the sole trait he had that I still admired: Ellair recognized swiftly what was in a man's eyes; which might be why he had trained his own face to reveal so little expression. He knew I was ready to tell everybody the truth about his goddamn attack-plants and with none of the niceties or "pardon me's" he'd used to pretty up his irresponsible actions. I think he also knew that I was ready to question the degree of his innocence, to wonder—out loud—if he might have anticipated or even planned this ghoulish vegetative holocaust.

It was getting darker by the moment and the incessant shouted demands for answers made it impossible to talk, so he led me past two or three guard stations to the anteroom. That was where visitors spoke to the inmates they'd come to see through cute steel-meshed apertures just about the size of a weeping face. The guards had been anything but expressionless—their worried gazes followed Ellair as we went outside, mutely asking him about the danger. And when the two of us went to rickety visitor benches, I still heard the frightened muttering of the men on this floor and on others and, added to that, the anxious buzz of voices from women's wing. Again, I was reminded of the hundreds of human beings in peril, even if the usual hundred or more had been released or sent elsewhere during the day; and suddenly I understood that saving them might well be up to me. Sure; sounds conceited as hell. But my old dis-ease had given me the opportunity to do something

meaningful at last, something that might bring me enough self-respect that I'd be able to make it as a writer—or a maintenance man! But really wasted, my jail clothes sticking to me and starting to reek, it also looked as if I'd been jacked into another no-win situation beyond my capabilities and I wanted nothing more in the world than a Bud—then ten, twelve more beers, lined up like dancing girls.

Ellair, who knew his man, gave me a cold Slice from a vending machine—he opened it with a key—and got one for himself. I could see the crummy part of downtown Indy through the meshed window behind him. It was only halfway through the rush hour and there wasn't a car on the street. What, if anything, was happening out there gave me the balls to put it directly to Ellair.

"I want somebody *authoritative* here," I told him, point blank, "someone *experienced*. Where the hell are the jail officials, a *cop* of some kind?" Part of my concern was my notion that a riot wasn't out of the question.

"The guards *are* deputy sheriffs." Ellair, ever cool, sipped his Slice easily as if he wasn't as hot as I. "Left under my direction while the other administrators attend a conference in Ft. Wayne."

I was a good tax-payer in a rage. "You're the only one minding the fucking store?"

"Mr. Stenvall, I have administrative experience. I graduated from a state-sponsored course in penology. I recommended the conference myself because it involves jailer/prisoner relationships." He'd managed to turn a glare of anger into a wounded look. *He'd* recommended they be gone; *this* very week? "There were no holidays on the schedule. Besides, everyone will return Saturday morning. I can't be faulted for a sudden rise in temperature!"

"We aren't discussing the goddamn *heat!*" I shouted at him. Incredible, the way the bastard knew how to blunt any criticism. "I want to know how a fungus germinates!"

"Very well." Ellair sat slightly forward as though lecturing. "The fungus's spore is a reproductive body. It is released in, well, tropical conditions—into the hot, clinging air."

A vivid mental picture came to me of Blackledge when the air conditioning went out, throwing, smashing, and scattering his plant. Closest to it—was his violent temper, his hot anger, an attraction?—he'd bought it first. Later, having picked it up in the same cell, Lew and Jimmie had been infected.

"When the spore lands upon the body, Stenvall, it attempts

immediate germination." It was almost like listening to a sublim tape, or a computer voice. "A thready growth filament called a *hypha* basically drills its way through a vulnerable cite or location."

*Like the human mouth, I thought. Ears. Puncture marks.*

"Once it has successfully penetrated its victim," Ellair droned on, his detached posed lecture style making me madder by the second, "the hypha . . . *proliferates*. Expands, procreates geometrically; reaches out. Like fish who get bigger as the size of the fishbowl becomes greater."

"And it goes on growing, right," I said, "until there's nothing left for it to consume?"

Something flickered in Noble Ellair's eyes and twinkled out again. "Quite so, Stenvall. But that isn't quite all."

"No?" I downed the rest of my Slice in a gulp. To cover the shudder racing down my spine and making me squirm. I'd begun to have the impression that Ellair was as foul as fungus.

"That inmate, Vick; first name Lou, I believe?" He waited for my nod. "He ran incredibly fast in *circles*, you may recall." As if I could ever forget it. "Until he could run no longer. I fear we may see more of that."

I asked why, barely whispering.

"Because," he murmured, rising and carefully depositing his empty can in a waste container like a good little citizen, "because, Mr. Stenvall, in insects these fungi interfere drastically with the nervous system, can *destroy* the nervous system. They seem to have the same effect on man." He smiled. "It won't surprise you, then, when the victims behave rather bizarrely."

His smile lingered a second too long. "You bastard," I said, jumping up. "You unfeeling goddamned mechanical *bastard!*"

He saw me closing in on him and lifted his hands like a choral conductor prepared to perform Handel. It was yet another gesture of icy control. "Strike me, Stenvall, and you're back behind bars to die with the rest of them!"

My own hands froze inches from his throat, the Frankenstein monster posing for a still shot. Ellair had put it exactly the way I could be stopped from beating crap out of him—and in the way that cut most penetratingly. He was, I believe, more quickly and closely attuned to the weak points in other men than anyone else I've known. He knew where to apply pressure, knew what to say subtly to make another human being turn docile and helpless as a

newborn child. An infant filled with initiative-sapping guilt. If I had detested him enough on behalf of all that humanity, men and women locked away in that awful building, cared *enough* to avenge them, I would not have been stopped from taking him apart. And he'd known that, deduced it all in a split second.

I had turned from him partly to avoid seeing his smile, when the next best thing occurred to me. Over my shoulder, I told him, "I demand that the plants be removed from each and every cell in this place tonight. *Not* tomorrow. If that isn't done, you can't stop me by locking me up; I'll shout what I know about your 'gifts,' begin that riot myself. Word will be passed from cell to cell. This isn't maximum security; someone will get out. And unless it's Crock, he'll let *all* of us out."

"Agreed."

Slowly, I turned to look at him. His cherubic face with the almost nostrilless nose was expressionless but not unpleasant. Point of fact, he seemed, well, serene. I marveled at the distance some people believed they were removed from other people. No way I had expected Ellair to agree; not that quickly. At once I questioned my own idea and wondered what I hadn't perceived that Noble Ellair had.

"This vicious heat wave shows no sign of breaking," he said, taking the empty can from my hand and putting it next to his in the container. I felt uncomfortable with the symbolism. "I agree that their presence in the cells remains a serious hazard, even while I believe that those plants which carried the peculiar fungus have already been, *um*, cleansed. The risk simply cannot be tolerated." He brushed at something on my shoulder with delicate fingertips, smiling intimately. "Whatever you think of me, Mr. Stenvall, I am not the adversary. In a sense, no one man is. Nothing is. In a broader and more philosophical sense, there is only the enemy each of us creates in his own troubled mind and sees somehow mirrored in other people. Those whom we believe to be, perhaps, conquerable."

I knocked his hand away from my shoulder. "Damn it, what am I not seeing?" I asked. "Come on, you son of a bitch, give! What is it that lets you be so goddamn smug about having to collect your little gifts?"

"First, while I'm taking them back, I expect you to keep your word about helping to minimize the possibility of a riot." He raised a brow, then ambled toward the jail interior. Maybe, I thought,

something terrible happened to the mind of a man who came and went freely in the midst of others denied their freedom. "If I seemed smug, Stenvall, consider this: Your rash young friend, Lou Vick, has been deceased several hours now. And *you*, sir, were *also* a tenant of the drunk tank." He gestured politely for me to precede him inside but I couldn't budge. I was rooted to the spot in horror. "Mr. Stenvall, you spent many hours in the company of Mr. Vick—and the plant that killed him."

*To be continued.*

# There's Magic in Shakespeare

by REGINALD BRETNOR

Concerning the peculiar events  
at the Gray Barrington Theatre.

Certain very old theatres, like some very old people, develop incredibly strong personalities as they age, often to the point where they actually seem to dominate those within their spheres of influence. Drury Lane, I've been told, is like that, and so is the Gray Barrington; and this, I think, is why what happened hit me so completely without warning. The Gray Barrington was permanent, immutable. The Garamond Players were permanent, totally secure, sheltered under the umbrella of the Gault Endowment for the Performing Arts and of Irene Gault's will. Even John Garamond, though we knew of course that he was dying, of cancer and old age, there in his penthouse apartment overhead, was still with us, and none of us, really, believed that he could die.

In the 1870s, the theatre had been founded by the great actor-manager whose name it bore, and whose daughter had married the first Garamond, Basil, John's grandfather; and the only changes made in it over all the years had been discreet: modernized lighting and plumbing, naturally, and elevators to supplement its broad, sweeping staircases, and later air-conditioning. According to our night-watchmen, themselves brokendown actors, it was filled with ghosts, those wraiths who are an ancient building's memories.

We of the Company—even I, as John's assistant and his Stage Manager—never worried about the future. With John himself a Director of the Gault Endowment, we never concerned ourselves

with changes in the Board's membership. When Carter Harrison, Irene Gault's younger brother, retired as its Chairman, we gave him a farewell performance and a party, and that was all. We welcomed the sleek magazine publisher who took his place, and then forgot about it.

Even after the diagnosis, John's decline had been a slow one, seemingly arrested at intervals by radiation and chemotherapy. Still, looking back, I can see how inexorably it had proceeded, until finally he gave up attending meetings of the Board, coming to rehearsals, or even showing up in his box on opening nights during our winter and spring seasons. Somewhere along the line, I began reporting to him at least once, and often two or three times a day in his apartment. There I would usually find him resting in his great reclining chair, Jennifer Meyrick, who had played opposite him so often and to whom he had been married for so many years, always at his side, and with his pain pills on a little table next to him, together with his cherished copy of the Doves Press *Sonnets of Shakespeare*, and—something that always brought a smile to his sculptured, now almost translucent features when he saw me notice it—the removable upper bridge he had been cursing as long as I could remember, which no known dentist had ever been able to fix for him.

His rooms were filled with mementoes of the past, with signed portraits and framed letters from generations of friends and lovers and admirers of the Garamonds—grandfather, father, son—of Gray Barrington and his no-less-famous daughter, and of Jennifer. His bookshelves were filled with Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Age, with books about the man, the plays, the theatres, and the players. But first and foremost, they held those volumes which, to my mind, did Shakespeare the most honor, the plays magnificently printed on fine paper—even occasionally on vellum—by the noble presses, Kelmscott and Doves and Ashendene and all the rest. They spoke eloquently to me of John, for in my opinion and in that of the best of our profession, he had honored Shakespeare more than any living man.

Even though more and more of John's work devolved on me, I of course did not move into his office. It was, quite properly, somewhat larger than my own, and the two were separated by a third, smaller one. Here John's secretary, Marcia, kept the Gray Barrington's files and records as meticulously as she had for the past twenty years. The offices were beautifully panelled, and his

and mine each had its fireplace, framed and crowned with dark veined marble, where ritually, in wintertime, we kept cheerful fires going. My office, busy as it usually was, could also be a place of relaxation and of refuge. Therefore it was especially cruel that the news should reach me there, and at a time of the morning when I had just spent half a painful hour with John, watching him fight the inroads of his illness uncomplainingly and, at the same time, making decisions I probably should have been making for him.

Our spring season was half over, and as always it had been a more than moderately successful one; and I was already beginning to plan for our two dark months of July and August, when the theatre closed to give everyone a break prior to the opening of our Shakespeare season, for which the Gray Barrington and the Company were so famous. I came downstairs, looking forward to a quiet few minutes, and found Marcia waiting for me, looking troubled and smoothing her greying hair nervously.

I smiled and raised an eyebrow enquiringly.

"Mr. Trevelyan—" she began. She always added the "Mister" to my first name, and now, because of her tense, anxious voice, it seemed doubly strange that she should do so. "Mr. Trevelyan, the—that new Chairman of the Board, that Mr. Karness, is waiting for you in Mr. Garamond's office, with—with someone else."

I didn't ask her why she should be upset; it was odd enough that Karness, whom I hardly knew, was there in John's office, waiting for me.

I followed her.

At the door, she announced me. "Here is Mr. Trevelyan James, Mr. Karness." Then stood aside so I could enter.

Karness had taken John's own chair, behind his desk but far enough so that he was not actually sitting at it. Looking at him, I realized that only one word was needed to describe him—trendy. Fairly tall, slightly overweight, smoothly tanned and looking very much manicured and massaged, he seemed to be wearing everything his three men's magazines advertised, everything the would-be jet-setter *should* wear, flaunting machismo and, at the same time, hinting at a not-quite-hidden and, at the same time, not-quite-assertive femininity. Looking at him, I remembered that he also published *The Vivid Arts*, a periodical dedicated to publi-

cizing the extravagant, the exaggerated, the startling, and one to which I had never paid much attention.

He did not rise. "Well, James," he said, "I'm glad you got here. I'm told you were up with John, and I wouldn't have wanted to send after you." His voice was like the rest of him.

I said, "Good afternoon," including the man who had come with him in my greeting. He was a tall, thin stick of a man, sere and sallow, with tight, thin lips and a too-long jaw; he looked as though he and his grayish suit, shirt, and tie had all been cleaned and pressed together. He sat on a straight chair, back against the wall, his dry, sallow hands steepled over the briefcase on his lap.

"This is Osbert Louther," Karness told me. "I don't think you've met before. He's a member of the law firm representing the Endowment."

The lawyer leaned slightly forward. "Osbert O. Louther," he said in a dry, frog-croak voice; then settled back as though somehow he had made everything much clearer.

Karness lit a cigarette, searched around for an ashtray, did not find one. I didn't offer to help him.

He frowned. "Better sit down, James," he ordered. "Our business is important. It's going to take a bit of time."

I took a chair as far from him as I decently could. "I don't mind saying that your visit puzzles me, Mr. Karness," I said. "The theatre's business with the Board—and I assume you have come on the theatre's business—has always been transacted through the Manager."

He laughed, and his laugh was totally out of place. "You know as well as I that John Garamond's in no shape to transact business, especially very important business, and we know that you've been doing more and more of his job for months. Besides, the nature of our business is such that, in his present state, the news might have less—shall we say impact?—if he hears it from someone closer to him."

I thought, *My God, what's going on here?* "I can assure you, Mr. Karness, that John Garamond's mind is still as clear as it ever was—and that is very clear indeed."

"That's beside the point! This is the way we intend to do it, and after you hear what has been decided, I'm sure you'll agree with us."

By this time, of course, I realized that there was dirty work

afoot — though I couldn't possibly imagine what — and that I was being handed the job of making it seem less dirty to John Garamond.

"Very well," I demanded. "What is it?"

I used my best battery commander's voice, and he didn't like it. He wagged a reproving finger at me, spilling a cigarette ash as he did so. "Come, come, James, let's try not to be peremptory. There's a great deal you don't know. First of all, since Mrs. Gault's brother decided to retire, we have had several changes on the Board. There have been resignations. There have been new appointments. The net result is that the Endowment's attitude is now more *au courant* —" He licked his lips, tasting the words, admiring them. "— more *au courant* than formerly. For instance, we have secured the services of Professor Earl Huxsmith as consultant, and he has also been appointed to the Board. You probably have never heard of him, but he is head of the Popular Culture Institute at Weywood University and the author of several books which have sold very well indeed, including *Cultural Eliteism in America: the Deprivation of the Common Man*."

He paused; obviously I was supposed to be impressed. I did not react.

"Dr. Huxsmith," he went on, "has surveyed our activities and our programs, and has concluded that by and large the Endowment represents the very worst of that eliteism in the arts which he has so acutely analyzed. A majority of the Board agrees with him wholeheartedly, and as a consequence we have drafted a very different program for the future —" He smiled coldly. "— and we are starting with the theatre."

"With the Gray Barrington?" I almost shouted it; then realized that I must have sounded absolutely idiotic.

"Of course. What other theatre do we have? It's the logical place for us to start, as Dr. Huxsmith's pointed out."

"Wh-what do you intend to do with the Gray Barrington?"

Again the frozen smile. "It is not what we *intend* to do, James. It is what we have already *done*."

He waited for me to question him; then gave it up. "We have leased the Gray Barrington for a year, Mr. James. We have leased it to a third party, who will take control immediately after the end of your spring season. That will give him ample time to prepare for September, when the Shakespeare season opens."

Without even knowing it, I had risen to my feet. "Mr.

Karness, I am familiar with the terms of Irene Gault's Endowment and of her will. They protect the theatre, the Company, and John Garamond against precisely this sort of an invasion!"

"My, my! I believe you yourself were an actor for a time, weren't you?" He said this knowing that within his range of vision was a great framed poster advertising *Julius Caesar* "with John Garamond, Jennifer Meyrick, Trevelyan James."

"I still am, even though since my voice failed me I have played only very brief roles—" I did not tell him that a Viet Cong shell fragment had robbed my voice of its endurance. "I still belong to the Gray Barrington. I'll still fight for it!"

He exchanged glances with the lawyer. "I merely mentioned it because I wanted you to know that I understand the theatrical temperament, the *artistic* temperament. This is purely a legal matter, James. There is no need for histrionics—none at all."

Again the lawyer leaned a little forward; I could almost hear his suit creaking as he did so. "The first point, Mr. James—" He ticked it off against a sallow finger. "—is that John Garamond does not own the Gray Barrington. As you will recall, Mrs. Gault purchased it from his father. Next—" Tick. "—the Garamond Players, or rather that part of the Company you refer to as the core group, has a firm contract with the Endowment, a contract practically guaranteeing your employment in perpetuity, a sinecure, shall we say?"

"That's bullshit!" I told him. "The Endowment has backed the Company, but we've never had to be supported by it. We've paid our way."

He ignored me. "Next—" Tick. "—next we have an extremely important clause. It guarantees that John Garamond will continue as Manager throughout his natural life or until totally disabled. The Board very generously has not taken advantage of his disability. It also—" Tick. He had reached the little finger of his left hand. "—stipulates that John Garamond shall have the right to nominate his successor. Notice that word, Mr. James. It does not mean appoint. The Board has decided that the interests of the Endowment dictate that the lessee of the theatre shall be Manager during his term of tenancy. There is nothing either in the Endowment charter or in Mrs. Gault's will to impede this. John Garamond's rights in the matter are no longer pertinent." He showed his teeth in what I took to be a smile. "It is generally agreed that he will not be with us long—only weeks, or possibly even days,

according to the best medical opinion."

I had read the charter. I had read the will. Suddenly, I realized that he was right. Something I had always thought impossible was taking place.

"But you need have no concern, Mr. James," the frog-croak assured me. "The Endowment has every intention of abiding by your contract."

"Damn my contract!" I made no effort to conceal my anger. "That's not my concern. Karness, who the hell have you sold us down the river to?"

He crushed his cigarette out on the carpet. He smiled. "Mr. James, have you ever heard of DeWayne Tuel?"

"Of whom?"

"DeWayne Tuel. He has been highly successful in the entertainment world. As a performing artist he is better known as *Gudge* Tuel."

And at that everything I had heard and read about the man came instantly to mind. For a moment, searching for self-control, I held my breath.

Then, "You—you're joking!" I whispered.

"I am not joking. No, indeed."

I stared at him. Gudge Tuel's origins were as obscure as a slum garbage can's. He had first surfaced, according to such authorities as the supermarket tabloid gossip columnists, out of an even more debased development of punk rock called, in its heyday, geek rock, about which the less said the better. He had been picked up by an agent named Mert Costa, who had pushed him, first into best-selling tapes of his geek rock group, then into the not-quite-hardcore porn tape and movie area, and finally into hardly less porny twistings of such old stand-bys as *Dracula* and *Tarzan*. He couldn't act, but he didn't need to. His audiences, usually high on any and every sort of drug, didn't know the difference. His private life and he himself were, by all accounts, as nasty as his media.

"The man's a sewer rat!" I said.

Again Louther leaned slightly forward. "You should be more careful, Mr. James. Such statements can be actionable."

I turned to Karness. "Well?"

He pulled his chair up, leaned comfortably over John's desk. "You're behind the times, James. Professor Huxsmith considers Gudge Tuel a preeminent example of today's youthful creativity.

My editors on *The Vivid Arts* agree with him. In fact, our next issue, devoted almost entirely to his astounding talent, compares him more than favorably to such past stars as Elvis Presley and John Lennon, who were pale and vapid by comparison. But he himself feels that he has not fulfilled his promise. That, James, is why he is determined to play Shakespeare—to revitalize a tired-out tradition."

I found myself completely tongue-tied. I stood there goggling at him.

"Yes," he went on, "he wishes to play Hamlet—that is, to start with—and then go on to others, Macbeth and Julius Caesar, I suppose."

"And this—is what—you want me to tell—John?"

"Naturally," he said. "The Board understands that of course he'll be surprised, but we feel you'll be able to break the news in such a way that its—well, any shock effect will be reduced. We all agree that, ill as he is, we do owe him that. It is the humane thing to do, James—the *humane* thing."

*In other words, you bastards, I thought, you want me to kill him for you.* I said, "Mr. Karness, it'll be the end of him, you know that?"

"Oh, not at all," he answered. He pushed the chair back and rose. "Just get in touch with me after you've talked with him."

After they left, I simply sat there for a while, trying to absorb it all, to get it balanced in my mind, until Marcia brought me out of it, asking me nervously if I was all right. I said I was, went back to my own office, and phoned Jennifer, thankful that she had her private phone and that there'd be no danger of John answering.

"Jenny," I told her, "I have to see you, and I don't want John to know—not yet. Are you free for a few minutes?"

I could hear her catch her breath. "Jimmie, what's wrong?"

"Jenny, Karness just left. The world's turned upside down."

She said she'd be right down; she'd planned to go out shopping, so John wouldn't think her leaving strange.

I made myself a drink at my little wet-bar, and made her one of her favorite martinis with Bombay and a good vermouth—I knew she'd need it.

Just as I finished, she arrived. I seated her, gave her the martini, and perched myself on the corner of my desk. Then I told her

the whole story. "Jenny," I asked, when it was finished, "how can we tell John? How in God's name *can* we tell him?"

She had turned very, very pale, and I could see her hand trembling as she sipped her drink. Now she was silent, her mind turned inward, weighing what she'd heard. I didn't hurry her.

When finally she spoke, her eyes were bright with tears. "I know what you're wishing, Jimmie. I wish it too. That there was some way to avoid telling him. But that's one thing we cannot do. He would *want* to know. He has the right to know."

"Jenny, it'll kill him!"

She smiled, a fleeting thing. She shook her head. "No, no, it won't. Jimmie, cancer is killing him. All this can do is perhaps hasten it, and I doubt even that. He has been failing so, so rapidly—not his mind, just physically. This morning I made arrangements for a nurse; I'd hoped it'd not be necessary, but *he* insisted. And Jimmie, you probably haven't noticed it because he does try to hide it when anyone's with him, but he's become—well, I can only put it this way—he's become positively *fey*. It—it's as though a gate is opening for him that the rest of us can't see—as though he is already halfway through. And he's not unhappy—he's told me so—except at the thought of leaving me. And you know how I feel, because I know how *you* felt when you lost Anne." She put her glass down. She stood, and came to me; and I held her close for a minute or two or three, while she wept unrestrainedly. Then, just as suddenly, she stepped back, dried her eyes, found her compact, and made her small repairs.

"Let's go," she said. "Let's get it over with."

We found him lying on his chair, the *Sonnets* open on his lap, his vexing upper bridge next to his ever-present pain pills, a florid, pleasant, middleaged woman in nurse's uniform busying herself in the background. As I seated myself next to him, Jennifer went and spoke softly to her, and with a smile and a nod she left the room.

I looked at John, and I was horribly saddened to see what he had come to. He had been a tall, lean, powerful man; he was not yet a ghost, but he looked as though all life's juices had been leached from him. Only his eyes were as alive as they had ever been—and his voice. When he spoke to me, if I had not seen him, I could have believed that thirty years had been washed away. It was the same great voice with which, without an effort, he could reach every corner of a theatre, and how it now could issue

from that fragile shell I did not know. I looked at him—at what was left of him—and saw him once again as Caesar, Shylock, Richard, Macbeth, Hamlet, always with the same fine profile, but always, always completely different, for that was the essence of his greatness as an actor: he ceased to be John Garamond; he became whatever character he played.

"Jimmie," he said, "I'm glad Jen's brought you." He broke off, his shrewd, clear eyes regarding me. "But something's wrong, isn't it? Something's *very* wrong." His hand closed gently over hers as she too sat down next to him. "Tell me about it, both of you."

"Tell him," said Jennifer.

So I told him the full story, every detail, concealing nothing because I knew he would not want me to. He listened quietly, not changing his expression, asking me no questions.

When I had finished, when it was obvious that there was nothing more to tell, he closed his eyes and was silent for some moments, as though he had detached himself from here and now. Then, "Well," he said, "I suppose I should have expected something of the sort when they picked Karness and he got Huxsmith on the Board. That explains everything, of course." He sighed. "Huxsmith's at the bottom of it all. He has advanced himself by fouling everything he's touched. He was only an Instructor when he started in Weywood's Dramatic Arts Department. Then he shocked everyone by resetting Marlowe's *Faustus* in the West Indies, with a voodoo Mephistopheles and everything. Next he was an Associate Professor, then full Professor and head of the Department. Do you remember? He made headlines by having some wretched coed play Ophelia in the nude—to a full house, God help me! And now he's going to try to foul the Gray Barrington and the Company. Well, we shall see."

Still, as he spoke of it, John seemed completely unperturbed. His voice could have been Henry's before Agincourt.

Again his eyes closed. Again he seemed to be communing silently within himself; and Jennifer and I exchanged worried glances as the endless seconds passed.

Finally he was again with us. "Jimmie," he said, "give me your hand. I want to touch you both. Please listen. There are people like this Huxsmith everywhere and during every age. As they themselves are incapable of creativity, their envy makes them hate it, destroy it when they can. Do you remember the mad Hungarian who attacked Michelangelo's *Pieta* with a hammer? Or the

deranged student who burned down Kyoto's Gold Pavilion? It's people such as these who keep messing with Shakespeare, cutting his greatest scenes, spoiling his finest poetry. Their crimes are not simply crimes against the work of art, against the artist. They are crimes against all that's finest in humanity. But listen! Statues and buildings can be murdered. Once and it's over. But Shakespeare must be murdered again and yet again. They do not understand that while true copies of his work endure, he is imperishable. So they keep trying. This time, Jimmie, they'll not succeed. We'll not tell the company, not yet, not till I've met this Tuel person, to see what he himself is. Then we can decide what course to take."

"Must you?" Jennifer whispered.

"Of course I must. You know that, dear." He smiled, beautifully. "And you don't really need to take my pulse. I'm as all right as I shall ever be."

He looked at each of us, and we at him.

"Will you arrange it, Jimmie?"

I nodded. I'd been prepared to warn him, to tell him that by all accounts Gudge Tuel wasn't worth the time, the trouble, the waste of energy.

"I'll do it right away," I told him.

**B**ack in my office, I phoned Karness and told him what John wanted. He immediately demurred—surely John's condition wouldn't permit such an interview? or perhaps Gudge Tuel would be too busy? or—?

I interrupted him. "It is what John Garamond wants," I said, as dryly as I could. "Don't you think we should humor him in this? It would be the *humane* thing to do."

He muttered something unintelligibly unpleasant. Then, "All right," he snapped. "I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything."

"Would you rather I phoned Tuel myself?"

He told me to call him back in half an hour and banged the phone down.

Half an hour later I called him, dutifully, and was informed by his secretary that they had heard from Mr. Tuel and Mr. Tuel's agent, and that the two of them would visit John Garamond late that afternoon, around five o'clock probably.

I thanked her, and asked her to have them stop in at my office; I'd be waiting to meet them and take them up to John's.

I stood for a time staring out of the window across the busy avenue, wondering just what John's purpose was, how I should handle my own meeting with Tuel and his agent (which I supposed meant manipulator), and whether I should be there during John's interview. A stiff drink and half an hour later, I decided to be neither friendly nor unfriendly, but as businesslike as possible, and that I should take them only to the penthouse door. I phoned Jennifer, and she agreed. After that, I pretended to busy myself with work.

They arrived at five-fifteen, and Gudge was pretty much what I had expected him to be—exactly what a good casting director would have picked to play the role the mass media had written for him. Tall and going into overweight, he was on the degenerating edge between youth and middle age. His face was heavy, with massive cheekbones; his mouth was at once full and cruel and petulant, and his general expression was that sullen, crafty one, half fear and half arrogance, one sees so often on the faces of teenagers with long records of delinquency and jail. His hair, dyed jet-black, had been expensively coiffured. He wore the patched, shredded jeans which were the service uniform of his admirers and, surprisingly, a good tweed jacket—with nothing under it except his navel and a necklace of what I took to be bears'-claws. I wondered whether he was ready to announce Indian blood as part of the trendy picture.

Mert Costa, with him, was an enormous man. His lips were purple, the whites of his eyes bloodshot yellow. He was soft and fat and, I judged, could be dangerous.

Marcia, much disturbed, ushered them in. I greeted them, and let her know I didn't mind if she escaped. Nobody offered to shake hands.

"Where do we find the old fart?" Tuel's voice was an unctuous baritone with a rasp to it; I could imagine the effect it must have had on geek rock's hyped up fans.

"Yeah," Costa rumbled. "Gudge ain't got much time. It's like everybody wants him. Tomorrow we got to fly to Hollywood. You know how it is."

I replied politely that I understood, that Mr. Garamond was ready to receive them. I led them to the elevator, and let them out at the penthouse level, where Jennifer was waiting for them. "Now you know the way," I told them, "you won't need me when you come back down."

As I pressed the down button, I heard Jennifer bidding them good afternoon and telling them how glad she was that they could come, and how much John wanted to meet them.

Twenty minutes later, she called to tell me they were gone, and that John wanted me. "I had hardly expected it to be a pleasant interview," she told me, "but I'd never anticipated anything like the reality. Jimmie, that Tuel man is *wrong*, deeply, basically—I felt it as soon as he appeared. The other one, his agent—well, he's a simpler type, one I'm only too familiar with; his god is money and he has a nose for it. That must've been how he first sniffed Tuel out. They came in, and answered John's *good morning* with a *Yeah* and a grunt. The agent slumped down into an armchair. Tuel parked his fanny—by the way, did you notice how his pelvis wiggles when he walks?—anyhow, he roosted on the edge of my nice French table, and sat there staring at our memorabilia, doing his best to look contemptuous and not quite making it. But now I'd better hush and let John tell you all the rest when you come up. Anyhow, I'm glad they're out of here."

I went immediately, entering just as the nurse finished giving John a hypodermic. He seemed to have diminished even since I'd seen him last, but neither his smile nor his voice had changed. Again, I sat down next to him.

"Jimmie," he said, "I want to tell you why I asked to see him. Shakespeare has power over people, and I wanted to be sure, absolutely sure, that there was nothing in Mr. Tuel on which his works might work a miracle. Now I know that there is not. Whatever constitutes Tuel's essence, I doubt that it's a soul—at least, as we know souls. I wanted also to determine whether perhaps Huxsmith was using him without his knowledge. He isn't. The using's mutual. Each is a destroyer in his way. I had to do almost all the talking. I asked Tuel about his past career, and the agent answered me, telling me how much money he'd made from tours, and tapes, and films. I made congratulatory noises. Then I asked him why he had decided to do Shakespeare, and he practically played me back Professor Huxsmith lecturing on how Shakespeare had written for the Common Man, and about the spontaneity of the Elizabethan stage, and how it reflected the Common Man's ideals and aspirations. He really had it down pat, and he finished up with a Huxsmithian soliloquy on the corrupt cultural elitism of our times, and how he and Huxsmith proposed to protect the Common Man from us Elitist vultures. Needless to say, I didn't argue

with him, though I was tempted to tell the truth: that Shakespeare wrote for his peers and his patrons, that he despised the rabble in the pit even though sometimes he had to insert material written down to them to keep them more or less tame. All this went on for the better part of fifteen minutes. Then, by way of making conversation, I started to tell him about some of the difficulties in playing Hamlet, and he interrupted me almost immediately. He stood abruptly. 'Well,' he said, 'now you've looked me over. I guess we've wasted enough time. Maybe you used to bust your ass doing the Hamlet gig. So maybe I'll bust mine.' His lip curled. 'But there's one thing I can tell you—' He looked down at that foolish bridge of mine. 'My teeth'll stay in my face while I'm doing it.' He jerked a thumb at Costa. 'Let's get out of here.' They left without another word, not even to Jennifer when she showed them to the door."

"My God, John!" I exclaimed. "Can you imagine what he'll do to the theatre if we let him?"

John's head was back; his eyes were closed. Without opening them, "Yes, Jimmie, I can well imagine," he answered me. "But have you thought of what our theatre may do to *him*?"

Slowly, his smile reappeared. His eyes opened wide. He propped himself up on an elbow. "Jimmie, Jimmie!" he said. "We can't stop him. I know—the Company will mutiny. Regardless of those punitive clauses in the contract, one and all will say *To hell with it!* and quit. But do you know what that'll do to the Gray Barrington? It will leave the Board—the present Board—in a position to sell the building, to wash their hands of it after Tuel has had his year with whatever cast they can scrape up. Listen, old friend, I do not *want* to see that happen. I want the Company—the entire core group—to promise me they'll go along with this. Can you bring them all up here tomorrow, after rehearsal? I want to speak to them. I want them all to promise. And I—I shall make them a promise in return."

His voice still was strong, but I could tell that he was forcing it, that he was close to the point of absolute exhaustion. Across from me, Jennifer was clearly worried.

I cast my doubts aside. "They'll be here, John," I said, touching my hand for a moment to his shoulder. "Shall I brief them first?"

"Please do," he answered, and smiled again, and sank back once more onto his pillow.

That evening, luckily, I had a dinner date with Emmett Ernst and Gwyneth Morris, two of our mainstays. It helped the hours go by and also, because they were people who could be confided in, it gave me a chance to judge the probable impact of the news on the rest of the core group. I told them before dinner, over cocktails, and watched them as they registered first shock and disbelief, then outrage, then rebellion. After that, I explained the legal aspects to them, and what the consequences of an outright mutiny by the Company would be. Finally I told them about tomorrow's briefing, and how John wanted to meet with the whole core group.

"And he actually wants us to go along with this—with this baboon?" said Gwyneth. She was small, and Welsh, and full of fire.

"I wouldn't put it that way, Gwynny," said Emmett. "I'd say rather he wants us to stick with the Gray Barrington. And if that's what he wants, then I'll bet he doesn't think the battle's lost."

The idea cheered her instantly. "Well, it won't surprise me if he has something up his sleeve, either something planned or something he knows that we don't. After all, nobody knows theatre and theatre people better than John Garamond. I'd say let's hold our noses, bite the bullet, and give it a go."

Even I felt cheered. At least, I knew that at the briefing I'd not be without strong support.

We actually enjoyed our dinner, and during it were able to forget our problem for a while, and talk about John and Jennifer and new plays and past performances.

I held the briefing when we knocked off for lunch, and it went very much as I'd expected, Emmett and Gwyneth giving me all the support I needed, and the rest going along, some of them reluctantly, some grumbling that they'd not make up their minds until they'd heard John speak his piece. It was better than I'd expected, and, rehearsal over, by twos and threes they took the elevator to the penthouse, and let Jennifer seat them. Gwyneth and one of the other girls helped her mix drinks, and presently the nurse rolled John in in a wheelchair; then she and Emmett helped him into his recliner. Do not misunderstand me. John did not creep in. That wheelchair entrance was as fine a bit of acting as he had ever done on any stage; there was grandeur in the way he held his head, and in his smile, and in the way he managed without a word to recognize each one of them.

He took the glass of port Jennifer brought him, and gazed down

into it as though in its ruby depths he could read the future. "Trevelyan James," he said, without preamble, "has told you why you're here. It is not something I would have wished to happen—God knows!—but since it has, we can do nothing but confront it. How we do that is up to all of you. I wish I could tell you I have a definite plan in mind, but there are reasons, and very good ones, why I can't do that. Instead, I'm simply going to ask you to have faith—faith in the Gray Barrington, and perhaps—" his smile embraced them all. "—faith in me. But above all, I shall ask you to have faith in William Shakespeare. This man Tuel is a passing thing; so is his ally Huxsmith. As I told Jimmie here yesterday, as long as the true works of Shakespeare exist, they cannot really injure him. You see—"

He broke off. Eyes closed, he sipped his port. "Listen, all of you, and let me assure you first that my mind's not wandering, no matter what my body's present state may be. Listen! There is magic in Shakespeare. There is magic in *Lear*, in *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. Shakespeare is magic. You have all felt it. Some of you, like I myself, have been drunk on it—and, yes, occasionally we've feared it. But now, now we must put our faith in it, and in my certainty that no one can violate it with impunity."

"But—but Mr. Garamond—" It was Andrea Aspinwall, a lovely, pale girl, a relative newcomer, slated to play our next Titania. "—wh-what can we do?"

"Do?" He laughed, and his laugh rolled like a fresh summer wave over everybody there. "Why, play your roles to the very best of your ability, no matter what occurs. But first promise me one thing. Promise me you'll keep the Company together. Promise me that, and I shall make you a promise in return—a very solemn promise." Again his voice rang out, challenging his audience, the world, the gods. "I promise you, if you keep faith with me, that Gudge Tuel will never play a single season in our theatre."

Andrea spoke again, timorously. "But how—Mr. Garamond, how do you know?"

John chuckled. "My dear," he said, "I feel it in my bones."

There were murmurings, hesitations—then abruptly, Gwyneth was on her feet, her glass held high. "To John Garamond!" she cried. "To the Gray Barrington!"

In the next instant, everyone was standing, echoing the toast, pledging their allegiance; and John, knowing that he had carried

them, closed his eyes again and sipped his port.

After that, there were a few minutes of general conversation, excited, almost jubilant. Then the nurse reentered pushing the wheelchair, and there was sudden silence. John's eyes opened. One by one, the core group came up to him, the women kissing him, the men to press his hand. He bade each of them goodnight. I was the last to go, and as I said goodnight to him, he told me, smilingly, not to worry.

John Garamond died shortly after midnight, very quietly, his hand in both of Jennifer's. A sigh, and he was gone. I did not learn of it until next morning, when she came to my office, and told me, and gave me his copy of the *Sonnets* as he had asked her to.

He died on the Tuesday and was buried on the Friday, and the service was small and private and by invitation, in the morning, when the Company could attend. In the interval, of course, Jennifer had to put up with all those unfeeling annoyances and tactless vulgarities that follow death, and especially the death of someone in the public eye. The working Press were not too bad; some of the critics, as always, were a persistent nuisance. And then there were people like Karness and Professor Huxsmith and their allies on the Board, oily with false sympathy, eager to look just once more on the face of the dear departed. Most of them I was able to fend off, being as gentlemanly as I could, but resorting to rudeness when I had to. Worst of all were the undertaker's assistants, trying to conceal their commercial pushiness behind mourning masks of unfelt sorrow. They insisted on putting John's bridge into his mouth, on fixing his spectacles, which he had never used except to read small type, loosely on his nose, on mocking life with their crude attempts at make-up. I was with Jennifer when she ordered them to throw the spectacles away, to clean off all the paint and powder.

"They know it's not going to be an open-casket funeral!" she cried, as we left the place. "That was one role John swore he'd never play. What were they trying to do—persuade me that he wasn't really dead? What need have I to remember him like that, when in my mind he still can play a hundred different roles? When, in my heart until I too am dead, he always will remain alive and be John Garamond?"

Then, in the car, once more she wept briefly on my shoulder,

made her repairs, and again was ready to face the world.

Gwyneth moved up into the penthouse to stay with her until it was all over, and every night some of us from the core group made it a point to take her out to supper; and she came with us because she knew John would have wanted it.

On the Monday, I had visitors, Karness and Professor Huxsmith and Louther the lawyer. Huxsmith was something I had not met before: a small, nervous, insistent man with pale eyes, a bald and oddly ovoid head, and a pot belly.

"Well, James," Karness told me, seating himself again in John's chair, "it's all over, I suppose, funeral baked meats and all. You will play out your present season without interference from us, so there's no need for us to contact the Company. However, Dr. Huxsmith and Mr. Tuel and I all agree that, as Acting Manager, we ought to brief you regarding the new regime. After Mr. Tuel takes over, Dr. Huxsmith will of course be Manager, and he has come prepared to explain everything to you. Mr. Louther can clear up any little legal angles that arise."

I simply looked at them; there seemed to be nothing I could say.

Like Louther, Huxsmith had a briefcase. Now he opened it and extracted a thick swatch of typescript which he slapped down on John's desk.

"You'll be glad to know, Mr. James," he said, his voice a curious contra-tenor, at once saccharine and strident, "that at least for the time being, in our first production, I shall interfere scarcely at all with the way your Company plays *Hamlet*. But I understand, and so must you, that you do not play *Hamlet* as Shakespeare would have wanted it. *Hamlet*, like all Shakespeare's plays, was written for the Elizabethan Common Man—a person completely *real*, completely uninhibited, totally *genuine*, very much like our more progressive younger folk today. That is why the Elizabethan stage permitted so much spontaneity, a spontaneity we—Mr. Tuel and myself—are going to bring to life once more."

"Oh?" I said.

"Oh, yes indeed! You, Mr. James, and your Company, and—I regret to say—the late John Garamond never have played Shakespeare's Shakespeare. You play the dreadful distortion foisted off on generations of playgoers by Cultural Eliteism, which of course is an outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution."

He paused—I imagine for effect. "Do go on," I urged. "You fascinate me. How do you propose to remedy this situation?"

He was impervious to sarcasm. "Ah!" he exclaimed, beaming. "Your Company shall play *Hamlet* the way they always have, except for a few necessary changes I have made. And against that drab background I shall introduce Gudge Tuel playing Hamlet as an *aware* young person of today, completely modern, Mr. James, as completely *true* as the Elizabethan Common Man! There will be our dramatic contrast—our vital, splendid Hamlet standing out against the dead, false play."

He rose, picking up his script. "Here," he told me, "is my rewritten version, with which I want you to thoroughly familiarize yourself. You will have plenty of time to make xerox copies for members of the cast."

"Naturally it has been copyrighted," croaked Louther. "However, you will have written permission to make the limited number you require."

"We plan to print excerpts from it in *The Vivid Arts*," said Karness, "certain key scenes, like the one where Hamlet confronts his father's ghost, and also the reenactment of the poisoning—you remember, where in the original poison is poured into the royal ear."

"Yes," added Huxsmith, "and it's also coming out in book form—in hard and soft cover. It will be used as a Dramatic Arts text at Weywood and by a number of other institutions." As he talked, his fingers struggled incessantly against each other, to a point where I began to wonder whether his nervousness and intensity were entirely natural. "Yes, yes, and Hamlet is going to be just a start. Think what we can do with Shylock, with the Moor of Venice, with Oberon—believe me, there'll be a very different King of the Fairies from now on! I wish Shakespeare were alive to see it!"

*So do I!* I thought, wondering how long it would take him to draw his sword and run Huxsmith through.

He handed me the script. "You do not have to read it now. I'll be quite happy to have you do so at your leisure, and of course will be interested in any comments you may care to make, constructive criticisms derived from your professional experience with the stage. They may be useful, in spite of everything. You never know—"

It went on that way for another ten or fifteen minutes, one

outrageous idiocy following another, Huxsmith simply oozing self-satisfaction.

I had one small triumph only. Just as they rose to go, Karness informed me that of course Mr. Tuel would expect the penthouse vacated when he took over, that he would then move in.

"I'm afraid not," I answered. "I'm quite sure that Miss Meyrick—Mrs. Garamond—will not move out."

Karness frowned. He turned to the attorney. "We can boot her out, can't we?"

"No," I said, "you can't. The Garamonds have a life-long lease—either/or—in both their names."

"What about it, Louther?" Karness snapped.

Louther licked his lips. He shook his head. "It's airtight," he croaked reluctantly.

As they left, Karness muttered something about working some sort of angle, and only Professor Huxsmith said goodbye to me.

I picked up Huxsmith's script, read the first words, and put it down again. Even after what I had just heard, they were unbelievable. *Hamlet*, I read, *A New Old Play by Earl Huxsmith, Ph.D. and William Shakespeare*.

I spent most of two hours going over it. Many scenes where Hamlet does not appear had been cut but were otherwise untouched. But every one of Hamlet's soliloquies had been mutilated savagely. Some had been torn to shreds, and Huxsmith had indicated that he expected Tuel to ad lib them. Others had been translated, twisted into contemporary drug-culture jargon. All his great poetry had been utterly destroyed. A few characters had simply been deleted; one or two others had been gratuitously added. For example, where Hamlet returns from England having escaped the pirates and outwitted Rosenkranz and Guildenstern, in Huxsmith's version he rode in on a motorcycle—Huxsmith specified a Japanese one—with a chick in stretchpants clinging to him. Again, where the Player King, sleeping, is poisoned by his brother, instead of the poison being poured into his ear, it was administered to him via an enema. (A marginal note explained that this was much more believable in the modern context.) But the single line which ultimately came to typify the whole thing to me was where Hamlet, meeting his father's ghost, exclaimed, "Hey, what you been doing down there in the hole, you old motherfucker?"

I went back to my own office and made myself a strong one. I wanted very badly to unload to someone—but to whom? I

couldn't burden Jennifer with this, not so soon after John's death.

I sat there, thinking of the promise I'd made John, the promise we'd all made, and wondering how the hell any of us could keep it. I downed my drink faster than I should have and was thinking of making myself another when there was a knock at my door.

"Yes?" I called.

Jennifer entered. "Marcia told me you'd had company." She paused, reading my expression. "And now you look as if you need some help recovering."

"I'm afraid I do," I answered, "but are you sure you—?"

"Am I up to it? Jimmie, of course I am, if it concerns John and the Gray Barrington and all of you." She looked down at the script, lying on my desk. "Is that something this man Huxsmith brought you?"

I told her that it was. I told her that I didn't see how we could stomach it, that no matter how we tried, I feared the Company would simply go to pieces. "I can't describe it," I told her. "It's unutterable."

"Jimmie," she said, "get yourself together." Then she drew up a chair, picked up the script, seated herself, and began to read.

I sat there silently, watching her, and realized suddenly that my hands were wrestling with each other almost as busily as Huxsmith's.

She read rapidly, and I could see that she was simply skimming everything that had not been changed and reading only Huxsmith's contributions. Her face remained impassive, deliberately, so that I would not resonate to any evidence of shock, horror, or disgust. In twenty minutes, she had finished. Her expression hardened.

"It's really not much worse than I expected," she declared. "It's nothing we have to give up the good fight about."

"My God, you don't think so?"

"Certainly I don't. First, all of you have pledged your word, and knowing you I know that you *will* keep it. Secondly, as soon as the first shock passes you'll remember that you have a sense of humor. No, I don't mean the thing is funny—it's not. It's miserable and revolting, but also it's ridiculous. And once you recognize that, all of you, you'll play along with it till something happens."

"Jenny, what *can* happen?"

"That's what that girl asked John, isn't it? He told her he

didn't know, but that he felt it in his bones. We are not completely friendless, Trevelyan James. Karness has a majority of the Board behind him *now*, but it's a thin majority. And one of our best friends is Macpherson Cleland, remember? He was a close personal friend of John's and mine. As an attorney, he'll act for us if that wretched Louther tries to pull a really fast one—I've talked to him."

I looked at her, at the splendid bones of her face, her arched eyebrows, the Elizabethan curve of her patrician nose, and saw that all her strength and beauty still were shining there.

When she left, all my doubts—at least temporarily—departed with her.

We played our season out without being molested. Once in a while, Tuel would come over with Huxsmith or with Karness, with Costa always looming in the background, and always they prowled around discussing stage-settings and directions. They made no effort to include me, and I was grateful for it.

Jennifer and I had cleared out John's office, and Huxsmith had moved in. At least, he had brought in a few books—his own, conspicuously, and a few about Shakespeare, I suppose to persuade people he was a scholar.

The core group, about whom I was most concerned, went about their business as though everything was normal. The only outward signs of their anxiety were that all of them sought me out more often than they ever had, on one pretext or another, and that we all drew closer together than we had ever been. More and more parties were being given; more and more often, after a performance, we gathered in the bar of the old Hotel Adrian, which the Company had always frequented. But no one spoke of changing their planned summer schedules. I myself took off, first for Canada, where I had to conduct three weeks of summer seminars, and then for Maine, where I owned a cabin and where I could relax and rest and fish. The rest went their separate ways, vacationing, playing short engagements, or—like old Douglas Corwin, who had been everywhere and played with everyone of any note—writing interminable memoirs. Jennifer flew to England to visit a married sister in the Cotswolds.

We all returned within a few days of each other, and found that Tuel and Huxsmith had been busy in our absence. Now Tuel had the star's dressing room, where he had installed some sort of

crony who had been with him in his geek rock days and who, we were informed, was to do his make-up and (as we learned later) keep him supplied with the assorted pills and powders that kept him suitably over-tuned. Changes, too, had been made in the theatre personnel who were not protected by our contract. Most of them now were strangers, busy doing strange things.

Huxsmith was in his glory. Dutifully, I had prepared acting copies of his script, and passed them out to those who needed them, and dutifully I had endured and soothed the absolute outrage that followed everybody's reading of them. Here again it was Jennifer who really called the tune, inviting the core group up to the penthouse just when things were critical, showing them the essential absurdity of Tuel and Huxsmith and all they represented, reaffirming everyone's faith in John and in the promise he had given us.

Tuel was ubiquitous and deliberately obnoxious. Huxsmith had apparently been coaching him with a smattering of pseudo-Shakespearean patter and what he believed to be theatrical tradition. Tuel sneered at everything. Actors—and with good reason—are superstitious. You never whistle backstage or in the dressing rooms. You *never* quote *Macbeth*, not in the theatre. He did both, constantly—or, rather, he whistled constantly and misquoted *Macbeth* at every opportunity. We did our best to ignore it.

But the greatest change, the one none of us had anticipated, was the change in the Gray Barrington. Its smells had always been those usual in a theatre, paint, glue, new-sawn wood, often honest sweat, all against a faint friendly mustiness compounded of rouge and cologne and powder, of stored costumes and past perfumes—the mustiness of an aging beauty's bedroom. Now it was not at all like that. Now the mustiness was there, and much more insistent, but it was a cold mustiness, a lurking-in-dark-corners mustiness, that of abandoned buildings, of damp, of rotting wood and crumbling plaster. The friendliness had vanished.

We started our rehearsals, Huxsmith always there, always naggingly insistent. He and Tuel had promised they'd not interfere with those parts that remained unaltered, but they did so constantly, by their presence and by their remarks to one another. Then we would watch Tuel strutting and screaming through his own abominations, scarcely believing what we saw and listened to.

Theatre of the absurd? Yes. One day I heard Huxsmith shouting and pounding in his office, and over it a calm, deep,

familiar voice, Douglas Corwin's.

I went into the hall, and found the door open, so I walked in—just in time to hear Corwin say, "Listen, little man! I have been cast as Player King. Very well. I've walked the stage with the greatest players on this earth in my time, and if you think I'm going to let *anyone* even pretend to shove something up my ass in public, forget it! Maybe the Endowment will let you foul up Shakespeare, damn them! But my tail's my own. Get your scurvy lawyer to read the contract!"

He stormed out, not even seeing me.

Huxsmith, red in the face, confronted me. "Well, Mr. James?" he said.

"It is not well," I answered. "Corwin's right."

Huxsmith fumed, started to say something, but Tuel interrupted him. "For Christ's sake, Hux, forget it. If it was me going to shove it up him, it'd be different. But, shit, it'd only be one of their piss-ass actors."

They argued for a moment while I waited there; then compromised on adding a bit of dialogue—a discussion of whether the poison was to be poured in the King's ear or his rear.

I left before my temper could betray me and the promise I had made to John.

Somehow, despite the gathering tension, despite our own forebodings, we adjusted to it. I, like all the others, did my share of whistling in the dark. I remember telling Jennifer that the critics would demolish Tuel, that the public would howl him off the stage, that most of the regular subscribers to our Shakespeare season would send back their tickets; and I recall her countering everything I said, quietly and dispassionately. The critics—at least all the trendy critics—already were proclaiming the startling boldness of the forthcoming production. "Don't forget, Jimmie," she said. "Critics aren't what they used to be. Why, it's been years since one of them even hauled out that hoary play on the name Garamond—remember the one about type-casting? Now they aren't well enough read even to know that Garamond is also the name of a type face. And the audiences aren't going to be the same either. They won't be buying tickets to see Shakespeare. They'll come to watch Gudge Tuel slaughter Shakespeare, and probably they'll come in droves."

Faithfully, we went through our rehearsals, trying not to look at Huxsmith's hideous sets, straight out of Charles Addams by

Weywood's Art Department; trying to ignore the hostile coldness of our once-friendly theatre. We partied more than we ever had, drank more, lost our tempers much too hastily—as only frightened people can—and did our best to avoid Tuel and Huxsmith.

Then finally opening night was there, taking us by surprise; and my heart sank when I looked out on the audience. Our regulars, those who had bought the season out of loyalty to the Gray Barrington, were swallowed up in a sea of alien beings, some as extravagantly over-dressed as Harlem pimps, some just as defiantly clad in rags and tatters, unwashed, unshorn, and others—lots of them—those Jekyll-Hyde trendies, stockbrokers and attorneys and consulting psychologists by day, and by night something else again. Beer bottles and cans were everywhere, and apprehensive ushers were trying to ferret out a few portable stereos which, hidden under seats, were screeching and banging out geek rock. Of course, the smell of pot was heavy in the air.

There were no vacant seats; indeed, more than a few people were sitting on each other's laps; the aisles were so crowded one could scarcely move; the box office had closed, and still they were shouting outside trying to get in.

From the wings, I looked up and saw that Jennifer was in her box, with Macpherson Cleland and another friend or two, perfectly serene.

Promptly at eight the curtain rose, the audience stamping and yelling its approbation. In a gloomy, ghastly light, the officers, the soldiers, and Horatio spoke their shortened parts, trying to make themselves heard over laughter and hooting and a still-unlocated stereo. Then, in the next scene, when Tuel made his first appearance, bare-footed, wearing his usual jeans and a lurid green T-shirt with SCREW You stencilled on it, they first went wild, applauding for at least five minutes, and then paid him the compliment of silence. Into that silence, he dropped the horrible lines Huxsmith had written for him, contributing his own ad libs: all topical, obscene, offensive, all designed to mock the play, the players, and Shakespeare himself, and each one greeted with new roars of laughter.

I was standing next to Douglas Corwin, who had been cast both as the Player King and as First Gravedigger. For a long time, as the ruined play moved on, he did not speak. Then, "Trevelyan," he said, "it speaks well for the Company that we're carrying on. It's not just those apes out there. It's not only what Tuel and his

friends have perpetrated. But have you noticed how dark and cold the theatre seems? That alone would turn many an actor off."

I was glad to hear him say it. It meant that the encroaching cold was not just a figment of my imagination.

I left him, and busied myself about the business of the stage—as much of it as Huxsmith had left for me—and for the first four acts I did my best to hearten members of the Company when I noticed them getting really uptight. I soothed the girl who played Ophelia when I found her weeping after an especially degrading little scene with Tuel. I calmed down Emmett Ernst, our Laertes, when he came to me and swore that, in his duel with Hamlet, Tuel was really going to have a fatal accident. I restored quiet to the greenroom after I found half the core group there hysterical with laughter. They had just learned that Professor Huxsmith was in costume, made up to look like a caricature of Shakespeare for a triumphant appearance after final curtain.

Finally Act V began, the curtain rising on the churchyard scene, a forest of looming steles and stones. There, under a ghoulish purple spotlight, was the open grave. Next to it stood a mechanical digger, a back-hoe, the sort used by large cemeteries to inter the dead. First Gravedigger was nowhere in sight; I knew Huxsmith had insisted that he keep his head below ground so his voice would sound like one out of the tomb. Second Gravedigger had been written out completely; indeed, in the *Dramatis Personae*, the role had been given to the back-hoe. I looked around. Huxsmith-Shakespeare was standing near me, next to Karness, who was wearing his image superciliously. They ignored me, and I moved as far away from them as the narrow space permitted.

Then Hamlet and Horatio entered, Horatio costumed, Hamlet now sandalled and sporting an old army jacket with corporal's stripes.

From the grave, Corwin spoke the lines Shakespeare had written. From the stage, squarely in the spotlight, Tuel came back with a distorted version of Hamlet's rejoinder. For a few exchanges, the dialogue, though bastardized, was recognizable. Then, when First Gravedigger sang, bursts of geek rock drowned him out; and Horatio, at this point dropped from the scene by Huxsmith, pirouetted past the back-hoe and off stage.

It seemed to me, then, that suddenly and subtly the coldness intensified, enveloping us all.

Corwin sang again. He tossed the first skull out. It hit,

bounced once, and rolled a foot or two. Our Hamlet greeted it with wisecracks.

Then, before Corwin started singing his third verse, I saw the second skull, which is supposed to be thrown out *after* it.

Tuel saw it too. He picked it up. He held it in both his hands. He sneered.

"Tough titty, Yorick—" he began.

He did not finish. His mouth dropped open. Staring at the skull, he uttered a short, dreadful howl, like a trapped animal. He hurled it from him. It landed dully, heavily, rolling almost to my feet, rolling very slowly, as though *deliberately*, almost as though it had volition.

I looked down at it. It was not white and dessicated. It had weight to it. The lower jaw, of course, was missing, but it was raw—like a clumsily butchered bone. Like a bone a dog might have buried weeks before. Gobbets of skin and flesh still clung to it, thin strands of hair. Even as it rolled, it stared at us out of half-empty sockets.

Finally it stopped, almost at Huxsmith's feet, and just before it stopped something fell from it, something that gleamed white and golden. I recognized it instantly. I reached over and picked it up.

It was John Garamond's bridge, and it was cold as death.

And now that coldness had descended on us with full force. Even time seemed frozen, each second an aeon, each minute an eternity.

Gudge Tuel's eyes were riveted on that staring skull, as though those dreadful sightless sockets held him prisoner. He seemed to be trying to clean his hands against his jeans, then trying to wash one against another. His mouth writhed soundlessly.

I looked at Huxsmith-Shakespeare, bloodless under his absurd disguise, mouth sagging open, spittle actually drooling down his chin. I looked at Karness, a wax-museum figure exposed indecently in all its fraudulence.

I held John's bridge out on my open palm, so that they could see it.

Into that sudden silence, Gudge Tuel screamed—terribly, once, a scream that echoed and reechoed hideously. Then he whirled, fumbled at the back-hoe, scrabbled to its seat. It started instantly, with a hoarse growl and a flash of flame from its exhaust. Yet I was sure he had done nothing to it.

Its engine roared. With Tuel still howling, his eyes still riveted on that skull, it whirled and bore down on us, throttle full open, its great steel scoop a threatening mouth.

I too was frozen, as incapable of movement before that living thing as Huxsmith or Karness.

Somewhere in that brief infinity of time, I heard Karness shriek, "*Tuel, you asshole, what the hell—?*"

His voice filled the entire theatre with its panic.

But I was not afraid, not even when the scoop missed me by a scant three feet and hit them both, flinging them like ruined manikins.

The audience, freed from its momentary paralysis, went wild, howling its anger and its fear.

And somebody—thank God!—dropped the heavy fire-curtain, dropped it as fast as possible, before any of them reached the stage.

As suddenly as it had started, the back-hoe's engine died. Tuel jumped down. Without even a glance at the men the machine had hit, he screamed again and fled. People came rushing, actors, stagehands, everyone within reach. Karness, unconscious, obviously had at least a broken leg. Huxsmith, badly damaged, was moaning hysterically and screeching, "*The skull! Take it away! His skull!*"

And Douglas Corwin was climbing from the grave, the prop skull of Yorick in his hand, asking what the hell had happened? Tuel hadn't even given him a chance to toss it out.

(Later, after the back-hoe had been driven off, Corwin and I together looked for the skull I knew I'd seen. We could not find it, not a shred of it, not even a shard of bone.)

Emmet Ernst came hurrying to find me. Tuel was in his dressing room, acting like Lady Macbeth walking and raving in her sleep, trying to scrape something off his hands—and Costa, mad as anything, was pounding him and yelling obscenities. His dresser was feeding him pills by the handful. They'd found two doctors in the audience, and ambulances were on the way. Meanwhile, the audience was raising holy hell. They'd thought at first it was just part of Tuel's act, but Karness' yell had told them something really had gone wrong, and they were working up a riot.

"Emmet," I said, "get those damned doctors up here right away. They're needed. Maybe between us we can get the zoo

quieted down. As a precaution, have someone call the cops."

I waited. The doctors came. I asked one of them—the more impressive looking one—to step out with me before the footlights. One of our prop men brought me a microphone.

We got out there, and I held up a hand for silence. Then I bellowed for it, the gain turned up to maximum. It took several minutes more before, grudgingly, growlingly, they simmered down.

I looked up. Jennifer was sitting quietly in her box, smiling at me. And the cold had lifted.

I explained that Gudge Tuel had suffered some sort of serious seizure, that two other people had been injured, that they were all on their way to a hospital. Then I introduced Dr. Pauley, who echoed what I'd said, adding a few medical terms for good measure. Finally, I announced that all admission fees would be refunded. For a bit, it looked as though we really were going to have a riot on our hands, but about that time the police arrived in force and the theatre suffered nothing but a great deal of dirtying and a lot of minor vandalism.

After it was over, Jennifer came to the greenroom and invited all of us in the core group to the penthouse to celebrate; and after a little while she said, "Jimmie, show me what you picked up on that stage."

I hesitated. I looked into her eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I want to see it."

I took the bridge out of my jacket pocket.

"I knew I saw gold glistering!" she cried, and throwing her head back she laughed triumphantly.

We all drank too much that night.

Two days later, we learned that Gudge Tuel had entered a sanitarium for a prolonged recovery from overwork and, said his agent, over-medication. Several trendy critics wept bitterly but briefly over his misfortune. Karness, when he'd recovered consciousness, had blabbed too much to an avid press about skulls and haunted theatres. While his broken leg would heal, it was quite clear his image wouldn't. He resigned as Chairman of the Endowment's Board, and Macpherson Cleland took his place. Huxsmith, who had suffered what was described as "profound shock and internal injuries," must have recovered because we heard he had returned to his university. Neither of them pressed charges against Tuel, and though there was some talk of their suing him,

either it came to nothing or was settled quietly out of court. We didn't bother to enquire. The Board made a deal with Costa for the cancellation of the lease, and three weeks later we opened again with another Hamlet, playing to a packed house again, but with a very different audience.

As John said, there is magic in Shakespeare.

# Three Sprites

by TOM DISCH

None of your usual lyric crap,  
but an issue,  
the issue of Cruelty!

## 1. The Stumpling

One eye-socket deep and mossy,  
Two nostrils on a perfect snout,  
Skull leveled plane in a chain-saw crew,  
He did anthropomorphize himself  
So well, my enchanted friend, I needed  
No divining rod to take the measure  
Of him: he was the monster from the id,  
A being almost indestructible.  
Witness the saw's first deep pass,  
Which his gnarled cheek so well resisted  
The lumberjack must commit his act  
Of forestry two inches higher.

"There's something to sing on your lyre,"  
Said the stumpling in an oddly piping voice.  
None of your usual lyric crap, but an issue,  
The issue of Cruelty! What is it  
Makes your race be murderous to trees?  
Why, offered our boughs, do you retreat  
Into your cities? Were you to live  
With us you'd learn how our thoughtless

Chlorophyl is isomorphic to your conscious Blood." Thus spake those lips of livid green; Then, with a gesture half-obscene, He disappeared into the trees.

## 2. The Gnome

Sly as a purloined letter, he hides  
In plain sight, an ornament  
To his profession and our neighbor's lawn.  
"That's right," said the gnome. "Go write  
another poem  
About how *you're* so much more canny than  
A man who has the wit to have his home  
Protected by a tutelary gnome.

"That is *not* what I was thinking,"  
I too much protested. "If I seemed  
To jest, it was not at your employment  
But your livery: those pointy shoes,  
The tasseled cap, the baggy pants...."  
"So how are *you* dressed today, Beau—  
Or is that Bozo?—for a dance?"

"Hey little fellow, don't get sore:  
I didn't come to start an argument."  
He nodded. "I know—you came to ask  
A favor. Ask away." He folded his arms  
Across his beard and didn't say  
Another word, as, somewhere in the wood,  
A dove recited a runic tune:

*See the sun and make a wish  
Make a wish and see the One  
Who wished and made a sun*

## 3. The Elf

That was easier said than done  
With the sun on the western half of the hill.  
Not halfway around it, I thought I could hear

Some children's voices raising a cheer:  
"Tallyho, boys—he's soon in sight!" "Higher!  
Aspire!" incited the dove. "Remember the goal."

"A bowl of blueberries in blood!"  
Shrilled the elf who strode beside me.  
"Shut up," I said, "you're being infantile."  
He slowed his pace and forced a smile.  
"There is something you've denied me."  
Then he pointed: "Careful, mud."

"And what is that?" I asked aloofly.  
"Why, mud's the stuff we all are made of.  
Thought even city folk knew that."  
"Not mud, you clod—what I denied you."  
"Tell you what, let's make a trade-off:  
You be me and I will hide you

Inside this acorn cap." Then *Clap!*  
The work was done. "So long," said the elf.  
"Thanks for the chat. You can help yourself  
To the canned blueberries on the pantry shelf."  
And so he left me in my acorn home,  
Just as it's written in this poem.

# JUST ANOTHER BEDTIME STORY

by A. R. MORLAN

"... adults are only obsolete children . . ."  
—Dr. Suess (Theodor Geisel)

**O**nce upon a time . . .

"Skeletor!"

"She-Ra!"

"Go-Bots!"

"My Little Pony!"

"Spydor!"

"Shaddup! Both of you! Melissa, Mikey, it is late, and I do not care whose toys are better . . . they all cost an arm and a leg anyway—"

"Whose arm? Yours or Daddy's?"

"Melissa — can — it!"

Helpful, Mikey held up his free can of Masters of the Universe — The Evil Horde Slime (some freebie; Victor had had to buy Mike two of those junky plastic figures to get a small can of snotty yellow-green *glop*) and asked with the innocent candor of a four-year-old, "Can I put can over Melissa?" as he made a lunge for his sister's summer-nightgowned back.

Visions of Slime-covered Cabbage Patch Kids sheets, comforter, and bed filled Lynda's head.

"No! You give me that can this min —"

"Mom-my, my doll! Ohhh, Megan Violet!"

Lynda plucked up the Slime-coated Cabbage Patch doll between two fingers, shook off the excess goo onto the bare floor (a few chartreuse drops landed on the latch-hook Smurfette rug Vic's mom made for them, but that could be cleaned later—she hoped), then sprinted across the hall to the bathroom, screaming over her shoulder—"Either of you monsters get out of bed and it's no more Disney Channel for a month, you *hear*?"

As she ran cold water over the lumpy doll's yellow yarn braids, watching the Slime drop off in clumps into the sink, Lynda said to herself, "Victor, you bring Mike home any more of this crap and I'll make you *eat* it," while Melissa sing-songed from bedroom, "Mom-my, there's a fun-ny lit-tle ma-an lookin' in the winder—"

Damned kids. Too much imagination, and at the worst times, too. It seemed like they instinctively *knew* that she wanted to do nothing more than go downstairs and curl up front of the tube and watch *Masterpiece Theatre* on PBS. When Vic was home they were perfect little *dah-lings*, *yes Daddy, we brushed our teeth and sure, Daddy, let's watch Mousercise together*. What a team, Daddo-and-the-kidlets, all yucking it up over *cartoons*. But just let Vic work the evening shift, and watch out, Mommy, here come Hell's Littlest Angels. Having washed off the overpriced and over-hyped rag and plastic doll, Lynda draped it—sorry, Melissa, *Megan Violet*—over the tub faucets. While she soaped up her hands and rinsed the last of the Slime down the drain, Mike babbled, "Mommy, the widdle man wants *in*, now." Shaking her head, Lynda told herself, *at least Mom had enough sense to keep me from all those stupid kiddie shows and fairy-tale books when I was a kid ... children come up with enough silly ideas on their own without stuffing their noggins full of "Fraggle Rock" and Nickelodeon, let alone Strawberry Shortcake and—*

"Hurry up, Mommy, he doesn't like bein' on the winder ledge—" —*the rest of that slop Victor buys for them, and watches with them ... he's a prime example of a fantasy-fed child who won't grow up—*

"He's He-re," came Melissa's parody of the little girl in those *Poltergeist* commercials. As she crossed the hallway, pausing to take out and light out up a Virginia Slims, Lynda made up her mind to call the cable company first thing in the morning and have them put a lock on all the channels except for CNN and PBS, and she was cancelling that juvenile Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, no matter how much Victor protested—

A chitter of what sounded like long nails being drawn across the window screen made Lynda run into the children's room, where she arrived just in time to see the gnarled troglodyte, who was crouching on the outside window ledge, finish pushing out the screen with his horny fingertips. It thunked lightly on the floor, bounced, and landed next to the closet door. That accomplished, he plopped down on the Snoopy rug under the window.

*This isn't happening,* thought Lynda, blowing the smoke out through her nose, and gagging because she hadn't done that since she was in high school trying to look cool, *this just can't be!*

The hump-backed dwarf (he stood no higher than the two-shelf Mickey-Mouse book case) took off his grungy white stocking cap, wiped off his sweaty forehead with it, then quickly jammed it over his mottled bald head, down to the hairy tips of his pointed ears.

("Spock-ears, Spock-ears," chimed Melissa as she bounced up and down on her bed in glee, and Mikey bounced and chattered, "Murf, Murf! Papa Smurfl!")

"Damned hod oud dere," he wheezed, scratching at the mosquito bites (Lynda prayed that they *were* mosquito bites—but considering how filthy he looked, and how he *smelled*, she couldn't completely rule out fleas) under his burlap tunic. Pointing a knobby forefinger at the children, he asked, "Dey twins?"

"I'm five . . . he's only four," piped Melissa, while Mikey cried, "Four! Four!"

"Hokay," the wizened being replied, then faced Lynda with "Yew come up wid my nambe already, or yew jus' gonna hand her ober? C'mon, Lady, I yain't godd all—"

"What?" Unobtrusively holding her fingers over her nose—didn't Mom and Dad say to be polite to strangers, no matter how smelly they were?—Lynda shot back, "Who *are* you? What's this bit about 'come up with your name'? And why do you want my Melissa?" (Only minutes before, Lynda would have gladly traded 'my Melissa' in for a raging case of chickenpox.)

The gremlin's wattled, warty face twisted into a *mouse*; in a patient, yet clearly exasperated tone he replied, "I can't tell yew my *nambe*, hit's against da *rules*. Lady, don'chew rec'amember dat pardy where yew tole me whad yew'd do ta gedda dade wid dat hair-ball in da funny fur suit? Uhmm," from the folds of his ratty tunic, the . . . being pulled out a little sprial notebook with "Accounts Due" written in crabbed letters across the front cover.

Thumbing the dirty pages, the gnome quickly found what he was looking for, and squinting, he read, "Six years ago, da Mu Chi Phi frat pardy, one wish granded, wid paymend ta be made upon—'aw lady, don'chew rec'amember yer promise?"

Suddenly, Lynda *did* remember, and dropped her cigarette on the floor (the kids chanted "Litter bug! Mommy's a litterbug!") when she pressed her hands over her face. The goblin ambled over, stomped out the butt with his thickly callused feet—he'd only come for her kid, not to burn down her house—then walked back to the window and waited for Lynda to get over her crying jag. Melissa and Mikey kept on bouncing up and down, giggling.

Six years ago, she ruefully remembered, Victor's fraternity had held a Halloween party in the campus gym, and frosh Lynda—dressed as some fairy-tale chick with a long, long wig (the woman at the costume shop had told her the name of the character, but it was unfamiliar and she promptly forgot it)—and had an unrequited crush on the frat president, a hirsute business major named Vic. He was the only reason she came to the party—*solo*—but he hadn't said "Boo!", "Get Lost!", or anything to her all evening. As Lynda—her long yellow wig trailing mashed cigarette butts and party confetti—watched her secret love boogie with a sorority sister named Heidi who was dressed as Minnie Mouse (Vic was a rather hairy Tarzan), almost crying into her Diet Tab, she had actually said out loud—to herself only, she had thought—"I'd give up my first-born child just for a chance at him," and standing next to her was this really short person with a grimy sheet thrown over his or her head. She'd assumed it was a frat pledge walking on his knees—Vic was known to make pledges do weird stunts like that—but after she spoke the ghost cut in to dance with Heidi-cum-Minnie, and Vic strolled up to her, the only girl in the gym who wasn't dancing at the time . . . and later there was Melissa, then Mikey, and Vic's promotion to manager at the MacDonald's and their new house in the suburbs—and *there's a stinky, grungy creature standing on the Snoopy rug, waiting for me to tell him his 'nambe!*

"Oh—my—God!" (*Great going, Lynda, now you sound like that Higgins character on Magnum pi*) Lynda peeled her fingers away from her face, wiped her wet palms on her shorts (Mikey squealed, "Fy'in, fy'in, Mommy's been 'fy'in"), and stammered "Wh-what d-do y-you m-mean, t-t-tell you y-your name?"

His crossed eyes widened in disbelief. "Y'mean yew don'nd

know? C'mon, I hadda hard nuff time *findin'* yew afta grad-eyation, an' weddin' an' ole fuzz-ball's promotions, so don'd gimme no hard timbe, hokay? Here's da derms of da condrac': Yew've thwee chances da guess my nambe, an' iffen yew don'd ged id, I getcha old'es kid—"

"My name's Melissa!"

"Hokey-dokey, I getcha Melissa."

Now Lynda dimly remembered hearing some of the other kids in grade school discussing some fairy tale about a little man who had a funny sounding name, and did some favors and expected something in return, but little Lynda hadn't been *into* things like that, and anyway, didn't her mom tell her not to fill up on "junk reading"—the same way she told Lynda not to eat "junk food"?—so now the little man's funny name was as much of a blank to her as the name of the woman with the long, long yellow hair ... oh why oh why didn't I keep my yap shut at that frat party? Too bad I didn't know then what an overgrown kidlet Victor really is....

The tiny ... being didn't look like he'd be likely to leave without his *payment*, and Lynda knew that a bargain was a bargain and that a contract was a contract ... and it wasn't as if the gnome had renegged on *his* half of the deal....

Lighting a fresh cigarette, and blowing out a quick puff in a futile effort to cover up the creature's really *bad* aroma, Lynda decided that he reminded her of someone ... *seven* little someone's, to be exact. While Lynda had never seen any of the Disney films her best friend Janet in the fourth grade had known all the dwarves names by heart; there was Doc, and Happy, Bashful and Sleepy, and the little one with the jug ears, Dopey, and—and—"

The creature "humped" and crossed his arms, waiting for her to get on with it—*there* she had it!

"Grumpy?"

"Lady! I'm a Troll, nodda sebbenth dwarf!"

Lynda puffed deeply. Only two more guesses. The ... *troll* put his left elbow on the empty windowsill, and rested his tufted chin in his dirty cupped palm, just killing time. Mike and Melissa shouted suggestions at her, "Maybe he's a Frabble, Mommy!" "Nah, Mikey's a Frabble, *that's* the Lucky Charms Lep-re-kahn!"

(The troll gave Lynda a withering glare and sniffed, "Mikey? Aw lady, yew didden nambe him fer dat cereal commercial, didchew?"

Desperate for inspiration, Lynda scanned the toys which were

scattered all over the floor, the dresser tops, and in and around the bookcase—Barbie dolls with day-glo bright hair, stuffed Smurfs, a battered GloWorm, Big Bird, bristle-blocks, Mike's Master of the Universe figures, including that ugly Skeletor, He-Man, and that skunk-headed thing that smelled like a carton of rotten eggs—

"Stinkior!"

"When id's hod, I sweats, Lady, so don'd rub id in!"

"Oh . . . sorry."

*How do I get out of this mess? Lynda exhaled, shaking her head. I can just hear Vic . . . "See what happens when you don't share things with the children? You've got to acknowledge the child within you, to free that child inside!" Pearls of wisdom from a man whose company had Ronald MacDonald and a walking hamburger on the payroll.*

"Lady? Yew deef? I yain't godd all nide . . . I godd quotas ta meed, places ta visit, an' I yain't lookin' forward ta jumpin' down oudda dad winder, so . . . look, Lady, don'd say nuttin' 'bout dis to nobuddy, bud I'll gibe ya a *hint-jus'* ta speed dis up, of course—my nambe stards wid an R—"

(Mikey yelled, "Teddy Ruxpin the talking bear!" and Melissa took a swipe at him with her pillow.)

Taking a long drag, Lynda told herself, *typical male behavior, if you think of it . . . barge in, throw his weight around, then assume that I won't be able to guess his stupid name . . . so he's magnanimous, giving me a hint, like I needed one . . . Macho pig Troll, thinks he's gonna show me how invincible he is—suddenly, she had it.*

Pointing a triumphant finger at her unwelcome creditor, she said, "Rambo!"

Pointing a *more* triumphant (and more crooked) finger at her, the troll said, "Wrongbo!" then, seeing her deflated look, added as he walked over to Melissa's bed, "Sorry, Lady, we made a deal . . . aw, now, don'd cry, yer young, yew kin habe annudder kid—"

(Mikey gleefully shouted, "Wanta baby brudder, bady brudder!" while Melissa crossed her eyes, stuck out her tongue and wiggled her fingers in her ears. Lynda thought, *she will make a great Troll.*)

"—or gedda divorce, whadhabeyew. I kin't help id iffen yew didden know my nambe . . . I thod *every* liddle kid had heard

o' me." As he spoke, he bundled Melissa up in her Cabbage Patch Kids comforter (she didn't even ask for her damned *doll*), threw her over his knobby shoulder, and carried her to the open window.

(Mikey began to sniffle, "Wanna go too, go wiff the little man, Mommy!")

Before jumping out the Troll waggled a forefinger at Lynda, saying, "See whad happened 'cuz yew didden read fairy dales an' bedtime stories an' nice Grimm's books?" in a voice uncomfortably like Victor's. Lynda reached the window in time to see him scurry down the gravel driveway, and hear Melissa's awed: "Are you a Gnome or a Smurf?"

Lynda made a quivering noise of indignation. They *deserved* each other. Behind her, Mikey kept saying, "Wanna go wiff the Murf!" Mikey not only looked like Vic, Lynda realized, he even sounded like his father . . . suddenly, Lynda was back at the window, yelling, "You, Troll! Want to make it a matched set of kids?" As the troll made tracks back to the house, Lynda quickly scribbled an address and a message on the back of her torn cigarette box, using one of the children's crayons. Carefully she safety-pinned the note to Mikey's PJs:

*Dear Troll with the R name—this  
is where Melissa and Mikey's Dad-  
dy works. I think he'd love to go  
with you too. Does this let me out  
of our bargain?*

After getting Megan Violet out of the bathroom, she led Mikey downstairs and out the door, and waved as the Troll led the children away down the lamp-lit sidewalk, off to where Victor worked. Now free of her over-imaginative brood, Lynda sat down and caught the last part of *Masterpiece Theatre*.

. . . and lived happily ever after.

# Death Flight

by JOHN MACLAY

If God had wanted man to fly,  
He would have given him airline tickets.

I don't consider myself timid; one can't be, if he's built a successful career in advertising as I have, and has the top salary to prove it. But I am cautious, a trait probably related to my old-fashioned, small-town beginnings. And as I've grown older, one of the things I've become increasingly cautious about is flying.

It didn't use to be that way. When I was younger, and had my first big job with a New York agency, the Amalgamated Zinc account took me all over the country once or twice a month. In those days I couldn't wait to get to the airport; the wide floors, the important-looking business travelers, and the 727s outside the high windows acted as a tonic on my office-bound nerves, made me forget any second thoughts. And when the plane—*my* plane, I'd think of it—built up full thrust, pressing me back against my first-class seat, then raced down the runway, then lifted me magically above the maplike earth, even the cottony clouds ... it was as if I was suddenly endowed with a new power, a joy.... I was a romantic of flying then, I suppose. And if there were any residual doubts, I'd simply think that if my number was up, there couldn't be a better way to go.

But then there was the close call at Baltimore, where we actually had to use those escape chutes the pretty flight attendants always tried to tell us about, and my friend Charley Smith's fiery death against a mountain in Colorado. Suddenly I began to watch the continuing catalog of air disasters with a new eye—a personal one. I'd flown a lot, more than most people; perhaps the law of averages was beginning to catch up with me. And besides, I'd left New York for the presidency of a small-city agency, which kept

me close to my desk; I was flying less now, and was less used to it. There was also the fact that I was older—the tendency, all romance aside, to preserve and protect.

So I found myself—find myself now—going to the airport with a new caution, usually after a sleepless night, after a nervous evening packing, where before I'd just zipped my suits in a bag in the morning. The grey tower, the echoing corridors, the mechanical objects outside, were—are—somehow menacing, like an overextension of man's reach, a tempting of God. Even Don Rickles seemed to speak to me: "If God had wanted man to fly, He would have given him tickets." But any humor aside, the first time I felt my cold hands, the lump in my throat, as I sped down the runway in—but not of—the suddenly foreign machine, there was a loss inside me I just couldn't believe.

... And a deep, gut-wrenching *fear* that almost made me swear off flying forever. But of course, in my position, one has to fly, unless he wants to become the curiosity of his profession by arriving via Trailways bus. So my mind, using that curiously-human quality of adaptation (of kidding itself?) has gradually developed a defense mechanism, a *ploy*.

... I'm sitting here now, in the airport, in one of the plastic seats at the departure gate, ticket in hand. Not looking out at the jetway, the 727, as I used to. No, I'm scanning the faces of my fellow passengers-to-be. The business people—nice enough sorts—like myself. But more important, the three young men, obviously on their way back to college. And even more so, the grandmother over by the window. And even more... the little girl, with her doll, looking up at her mother's smiling face.

If, ever, I don't find these people about to join me on my flight, find instead a weird assemblage of criminal-looking types, shyster lawyers, insensitive people the world wouldn't miss—I'll simply turn in my ticket, no questions asked, and book another plane. Because, you see—I suppose it's my small-town faith coming back—it's my firm conviction that even if I have been found wanting, even if, all justice aside, my number has finally come up... surely God, in His mercy, has not meant it for the good people, for *them*. Some failed take-off, some fiery crash—even if they too, in a way, are tempting fate. And therefore—it's something better than a ploy, isn't it?—I'll be safely carried along.

... I'm getting up now, reaching for my briefcase—they're calling my row. Lining up at the entrance to the jetway, between

the grandmother and the little girl. Walking down the unearthly, vibrating tube, with its drafts of outside air, to the door of the plane, and the smiling attendant who takes my boarding pass. Moving inside the confines of the warm cabin, with its piped-in music and soft carpet. Finding my seat, easing myself into it, buckling up. Hearing the door close, the engines charge, and feeling the machine slowly pull away from the gate.

... Feeling it taxi—I don't look outside—to the end of the runway, then begin its thrust, slowly at first, then faster, *faster* ...

... We're airborne. I sigh with relief—everything's going to be all right now—and casually turn in my seat, to glance down the narrow aisle at the friendly, *safe* people behind me ...

*Whose faces warp into screams, as we go down.*

# Cheapskate

by G.L. RAISOR

Some parents  
just don't know what birthdays  
are *supposed* to be about.

Dad drives too fast when he's upset, and Mom says that one day he's going to cause a terrible accident. Maybe even kill somebody. Dad always says the same thing to her: Elizabeth, why don't you cut off my goddamn balls, sling them over the rear-view mirror, and just be done with it?

Boy! Dad must be pissed right now. Because his face is all purple and everything is really whizzing by.

I guess it's mostly my fault that Dad is angry. You see, yesterday, I turned eleven and I was expecting a special present. But I didn't get what I asked for—they gave me a stupid old camera instead.

Can you believe that?

All I wanted was a pair of roller skates. I mean, it wasn't like I didn't drop enough hints.

Mom tried her best to smooth things over with a talk about how this had been a tough year for Dad, what with the economy being in the toilet and all. So I tried to act thrilled about the camera, but I don't think anybody was fooled.

Everything would've been fine, except they decided to dump me with the sitter. I heard them whispering about going to some big party where Mom worked. That was when I started to get mad. If Dad had enough money to take Mom to a dumb old party, then he had money for my roller skates.

I was upstairs, working on a plan, when I heard the sitter

come in. Her name is Mary Ann, and Eddie, who lives down the street, said he heard she was a nympho. But nobody pays much attention to Eddie, cause he's been brain-damaged ever since Monica Pfieffer and two of her friends mooned him at the last school picnic.

Things were so boring I lay on the bed and listened while Mom and Mary Ann talked about the new sofa in the living room. Girls sure do get excited about the goofiest stuff.

Mom thinks Mary Ann is sweet, and Dad likes her, too. But I think Dad likes her because she wears mostly jogging shorts. He watches her like our dog, Skippy, watches my plate.

Only Skippy don't drool as much.

Mom told Mary Ann to make herself comfortable while she ran out to the store and picked up a few things. Mom had been gone about two minutes when Dad came out of his study and started sucking up to Mary Ann, asking her dumb stuff like how she liked college and if she had any new boy friends. They were laughing and giggling, so I thought I'd better turn on the TV before I barfed.

I was coming downstairs for a coke when I noticed how quiet it was in the living room.

So I peeked around the corner ...

They were both sitting on the new sofa. Only Dad had his hands under Mary Ann's top, and he was breathing harder than the last time he tried to wrestle away Mom's Master Card.

I was gonna sneak back up the stairs, but then I got an idea. It was pure genius. After all, Dad *had* bought me a camera to take pictures ...

Today, while Mom was gone to bunco, I showed one to Dad. He took one look and his face went all pale and sweaty, like he was about to faint or throw up. He kept asking why I would do such a terrible thing. Over and over. It was real monotonous.

Finally I told him to relax, that if he came across with the new roller skates, Mom wouldn't have to see the pictures. He went kinda crazy when I said that. Started making lots of threats. I gotta admit I was scared, but, after a while, he calmed down. Except for a big vein in his forehead that kept jumping around.

Then he asked, real quiet like, if this was going to be a one-time deal or if there would be other demands.

I said I didn't know. We'd have to see how my next birthday went. He sighed, just like he does when Mom gets the upper

hand, and I knew he was gonna give in. All the air oozed out of him and he sort of slumped over.

So we went out and picked up a real nifty pair of roller skates, and Dad said I could even wear them home. But I don't think we're going to make it home. Dad is driving too fast and he's not keeping his eyes on the road. Mostly, he keeps looking back through the rear window and smiling. I guess he's checking to make sure the rope is still tied. He's speeding up again . . . and *I don't think these skates can go much faster!*

# Two Poems

by DAVID C. KOPASKA-MERKEL

Could dead bones live  
they'd dream of her.

## Pearls of Rain

### I. *The Ecdysiast as Clone*

Expressive as the dawn (in my dream)  
She rises,  
But she has not your grace, thank God!  
The rain dyes my mood black,  
Filling my thoughts with bile;  
She tastes my self-pity from across the room.  
A little older, and the smile might be the same.  
"One day, all I wore were cowboy boots,"  
She says, but  
You were ever conventional, even in passion.  
We buy each other gifts;  
In the surf, in the rain, we dance.

### II. *The Clone as Lover*

Eyeballs rattled in a golden cup:  
Three identical children diced for the right to die.  
"She stripped off her vest," I said,  
Musing over a rare vintage of broken yesterdays.  
"She peeled like a ripe onion."  
(I read that on a subway somewhere.)  
Could dead bones live they'd dream of her,  
But under the mask she had no face at all; just  
A blank visage wrinkled and dry as autumn leaves.



III. *The Mountains; The Sea*

Lost eons fill the desert with  
Chalky pastel light.

There, I imagine a vaguer sort of sorrow  
Replacing the knife of your death in my heart.  
Westward, then. The car  
Bears the dry cinnamon scent  
Of the desert.

"I saw a movie once," I say.  
(Jalopy weaving in country-road ecstacy).  
She does that. I drive off the road into  
The Clouds. You remember the rain.  
In my dream she speaks,  
Lacquered wisdom tickling in my ear.

IV. *Idaho in 77*

I really did one once. She said  
"Fuck me right here."  
The alley was hot, and smelled,  
Of urine, dung, and garbage.  
But with her, the dream was brandy.  
In that long, dry spring,  
Brandy.

V. *California in 82*

The nightmares came with your caress.  
I never told you. I only  
Did that once. I only....  
She said,  
"I have a right to know."  
I didn't know she lived life  
Like a movie,  
Dying a bit each time.

**Goldfish in My Head**

I. *The View Outside*

Limpid crystals of pellucid thought  
settle,  
winking,

in my  
fishbowl  
brain.

Flashing rainbow bands bedazzle on the white-washed walls.  
Chatoyant shadows stir within each crystal rhomb,  
Reflecting jerks and twitches  
of my bound and bleeding limbs.

### *II Rhyme nor Reason*

Chairbound, thought-bound, spellbound—  
I ponder pulsing nodes which bud beneath my crown;  
Glittering seeds drift rootward  
to a fertile bed medullar,  
Burrow in my brainstem, root, and leaf, and flower,  
Bursting shards of frozen aurum shiver, swim, and stare ....

I almost dream,  
a snatch between the crystal glares,  
(Bewilderment of hue with which my glassy dome is rife.)  
Wisps of life, green laughter, cinnamon  
and strife.

### *III The View Within*

Each languid traverse  
births a tumult in my head,  
Ionic memories are raped to feed the carp I dread,  
Memories and fragments, each a shredding snapshot caught,  
To nurture bitter lattices of hexacystal thought,  
All *self* laid to rest in frigid beauty's bed:  
Refracted and reflected—  
The goldfish in my head.

# The Children of Lommos

by DARRELL SCHWEITZER  
and JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT

The two skeletons lay buried  
and embracing, almost like two lovers  
preserved beyond death  
for millennia.

The bones were not burned. That was the remarkable thing about them, Blake realized. The rest was obvious enough as he stood in the excavation trench in the blazing sunlight, the evidence of some Bronze Age atrocity all around him. The scene came in a flash of the imagination: bearded, grubby soldiers in crude helmets, running figures silhouetted by the flames, screams, blood gushing over the paving stones of the temple complex. Now only pottery, stone walls with their cryptic mosaics, and the charred specks of grain remained, but they told the story clearly enough to an archaeologist. It wasn't like anything in Homer.

And . . . the skeletons.

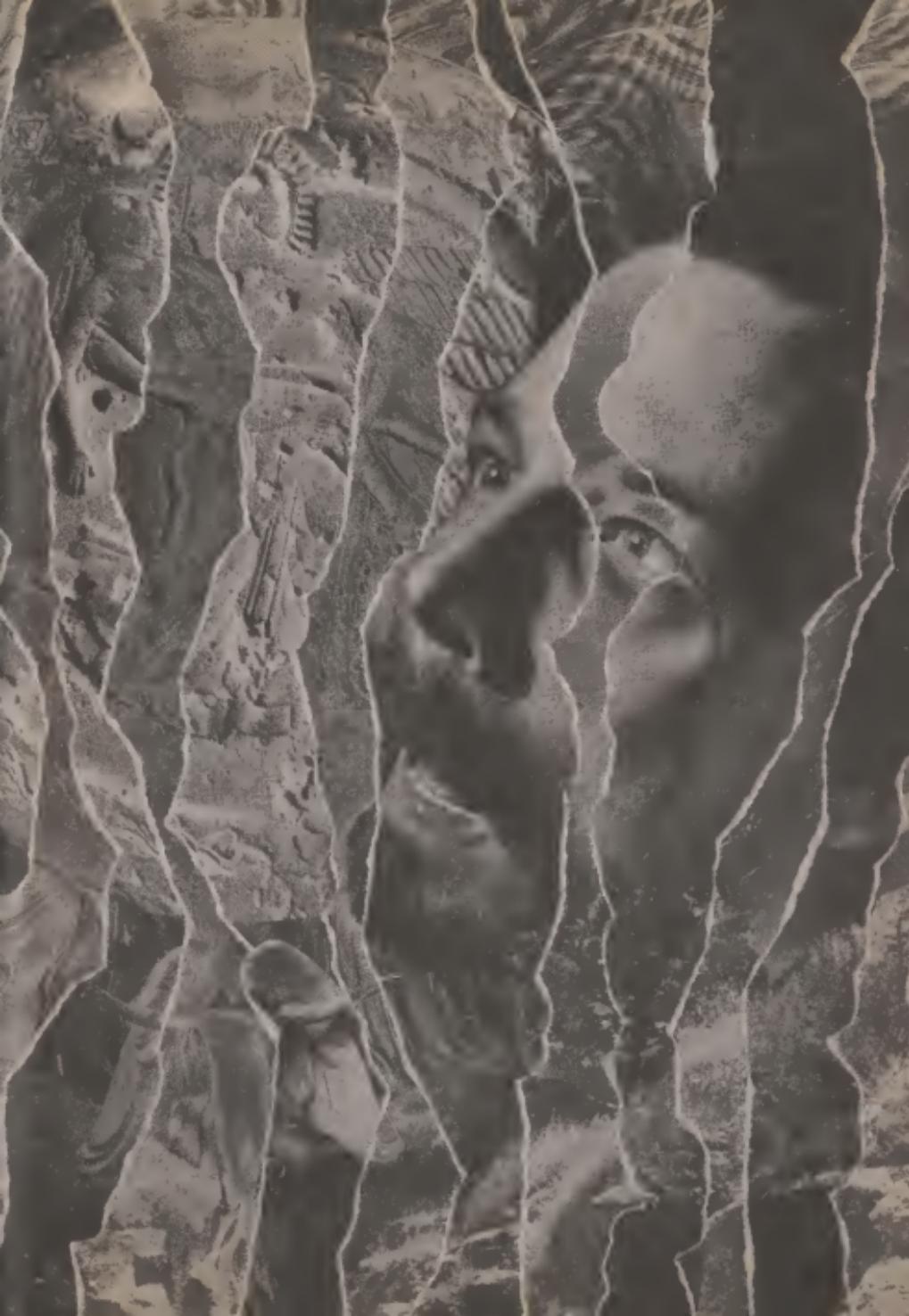
There were two of them, apparently, both still partially buried: the curving white of a cranium here, the ribs, and what looked like a shattered scapula. One of the Greek workmen had probably struck it with a pick. The undisturbed stratigraphy showed that nobody had seen the bones in four thousand years.

"You like it, eh, *kirie* Blake?" the man next to him said in Greek, bringing him out of his reverie.

"What? Oh, yes, Kostas," he said. "You found it?"

"No, Manoli did."

Blake glanced at the dark-faced youth who stood behind Kostas, grinning happily. Kostas was the boy's father, a wiry man



of about fifty, so burned and wrinkled by Crete's hot sun that his face looked like worn leather, incapable of any expression. He'd worked in the fields all his life, picking olives, grapes, and chick-peas, until the Lommos excavation had hired him as a trench foreman. Now his own broad grin was startling.

"Yes, I like it very much," Blake said. "I'll work it out myself."

He knelt down and got out a brush to clear more of the dirt away. Kostas understood that he wouldn't be needed there for a while and turned to the other side of the trench. Blake heard the rhythmic *thuck, thuck, thuck* sound of digging shovels as work resumed, the occasional noise of a pottery shard being tossed into a pail, or a pause while a bit of stone or roof-tile was studied and then thrown out of the trench onto the discard heap. He could hear the Greeks talking among themselves—something about the bones and bad luck?—but they were speaking faster than they would to him, and he couldn't quite hear every word or follow the conversation. Before long he had shut them entirely from his mind, and he was alone once more with his discovery, which now seemed to be—romantically, impossibly—a pair of *embracing* skeletons that had somehow escaped the flames when ancient marauders burned the entire complex to the ground.

He knew there would be several papers in this. It was an important find, even a mystery, something he'd been waiting years to uncover. He wanted to jump and shout in triumph, but the workman would have thought him odd, and he had his own ideas about decorum. Besides, Crete wasn't far from North Africa. It caught the Sahara's burning wind, and with the hundred-and-twenty-degree temperature, no one jumped or ran or even shouted unnecessarily.

Suddenly dirt showered down onto his head. Pebbles rattled off the shard bucket nearest him.

"Find something, old man?"

Cursing and sputtering under his breath, he scrambled back, then looked up, his hand shielding his eyes from the glare. There was only a silhouette, but of course he knew the voice.

"Yes, *Larry*, I found something." There was a sharp edge to his voice. He tried to control his temper.

The other stepped back from the edge of the trench. "Oh, sorry."

Larry Parker might well have been a boy wonder, one of the

greatest living experts on Minoan pottery at the age of thirty-two, but he could also be a royal pain in the ass. He knew perfectly well not to stand that close to a trench wall, just as he knew Blake didn't like to be called an old man at forty. But there was only one person in Larry Parker's little world, and that was Larry. Other people were merely objects for his amusement, or tools for social climbing. The rest might've been dirt, for all he cared.

Blake knew he wasn't sorry. He moved forward, half-covering his find with his body.

"Larry, behave yourself." Blake recognized his wife's voice. "This could be exciting. What've you found, dear? Need any help?"

Blake looked up again. Janice stood a tactful distance away, a little behind Larry. "Well, yes. I need somebody to go get Peter on the double. I want him to take a picture of this *in situ*."

"Really exciting?" Larry said, sounding bored.

"Yes, it is. The bones are in good shape. A little weathering, maybe, but nothing serious, except for a shattered scapula. Toss me a plastic bag for the bone chips?"

"Yeah, sure, old man."

"Larry, please . . ." Janice said.

Larry kicked a bag into the trench.

"Thanks."

"I'll get Peter," Larry said.

Blake took out a magic marker and tagged the bag appropriately. Yes, trench 13A, level 22. He could do it in his sleep. As he worked, he glanced up once more and saw Larry, almost invisible against the sun, take Janice by the hand.

He knew Larry was making no attempt to hide what he was doing. In Larry's world, another man's wife was as easily picked up as any other common object, particularly when she was five years younger than her aging, decrepit, slightly-balding husband. Blake knew he should've been angry. Somehow, there was a distant pain, and a longing emptiness inside. But that was all. *The heat . . .*

He almost dropped the first bone fragment when he picked it up, and at once Larry and Janice were forgotten. The bone was cold, slick, almost wet. For an instant he thought back fifteen years, to a joke some graduate students had played on him in Illinois, when they'd been working an Indian burial mound. They'd carved a whole skeleton out of ice, going through all that trouble just to see the look on his face as his precious find melted away beneath his fingertips. But here in Crete—in this heat—it was

a mere paranoid fantasy.

He pinched the bone gently between thumb and forefinger. It didn't snap, which meant it hadn't decayed. He was glad of that. He wouldn't have to coat the skeletons with acetone before moving them to his workroom in the village.

But this bone was more than well-preserved. It seemed fresh, almost alive.

They paused for lunch around twelve-thirty that day. The workmen had gone off to eat by themselves, while the members of the expedition proper—John Blake, Peter O'Mara the photographer, Larry, Janice, and Joe Spatakis, the Greek archaeologist who had helped them get the Lommos excavation permit—sat on a small olive-tree-shaded hill overlooking the excavation and the dazzling blue Mediterranean. A roughly circular middle-Minoan wine press had been propped up on rocks before them, and it served well enough as a picnic table. Feta cheese, German head cheese, sausages, canned ham, black olives, fresh loaves of crusty bread, and fruit (local figs and melons, oranges and apples from the Common Market) were laid out, along with an open water jug and plastic cups. Everyone ate help-yourself-to-whatever-you-want style, quietly at first, Blake trying to avoid saying anything to Larry, Larry almost tactful for a moment. But it was inevitable that conversation turn to Blake's discovery. Joe Spatakis started it.

"The first complete skeletons of the year," he said.

"Perfectly preserved, too," said Blake. "I've never seen anything like them."

"Don't count your bones before they're hatched," said Larry.

Blake glared at him. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

Larry shrugged. "Well, they could just be filler for the foundation."

"Don't be silly, Larry," Janice said.

Blake said, "I'm going to find out how they died."

He worked through the afternoon with a kind of desperate intensity, oblivious to all around him. It was only after several hours that he paused and considered his own obsession with detached amazement.

Of course this was an important find, something he had been waiting for for a long time. But somehow he *had* to know about

these two, as individuals, as people, as if they'd been someone he had known; and that didn't make any sense. He was a scientist, he told himself. These bones were objects for study, no different from pieces of pottery or carved stones. Science is slow, methodical work, not to be rushed by some vaguely defined emotional urge to prove something.

Nevertheless, he felt an irrational need to hurry. He wondered if his brains were slowly frying in the sun. Still, he kept on working.

He confirmed his initial impression. The two skeletons were definitely embracing, almost like lovers preserved for millennia beyond death. He could only wonder how the bones had gotten in such a position. Had some crazed Bronze Age priest arranged the corpses after some kind of sacrifice?

No, he was sure it was something more interesting than that. Call it a hunch.

Wiping his brow, he settled back on his heels and glanced up. The sun had passed zenith hours ago, and was well along its slide down into the west. It pained his eyes. *Time to stop soon*, he thought. He looked down, across the trench at the largest of the walls still standing in the temple.

Clay had been plastered over the rough field stones, and various colored tiles set in to form pictures. He'd seen similar mosaics from palaces like Knossos and Agia Triada at the Heraklion museum. Most of this series of mosaics had been destroyed by fire and time, but his imagination could fill in the gaps: to start, a picture of the temple as it had once been, with four altars to the gods. At the second, human victims lying on the altars, with the priest holding something obscured—probably a knife—over his head. The middle sequence was completely gone. But at the end, the first victims could be seen again, standing in front of the altars with the priest. *Bizarre*. That was the word for it. The whole excavation team had gone over the mosaics time and again. They'd never come up with a satisfying answer as to what the pictures showed.

"Is that what they did to you?" he asked the skeletons. Old men like him often talked to themselves, he thought. "Did they kill you, then bring you back to life—only you didn't live to tell about it?" He laughed. "What's wrong, your gods not strong enough?"

He could certainly use a strong god, he thought. A god who'd

strike down Larry Parker for his sins....

He heard a crunch of shoes on sand, winced, and looked up, half-expecting to see Parker there, come to gloat. But Joe Spatakis stood looking down at him, smiling a bit.

"*Poli zesti*," he said, then in English thick with a Greek accent, "It's very hot."

Blake shrugged. "Hi."

"At least interesting things are turning up. Otherwise we all play hookey and go swimming, eh, John?"

"No, not allowed. You swim on your own time." Blake chuckled. "Did something else interesting turn up today?"

"Didn't you hear about my 19A this morning?"

"What's there?"

"A well. It smells damp, so there is probably fresh water at the bottom."

"Didn't you drop anything in to see?"

"Already it is filled up with stones. The funny thing is . . ." Spatakis looked off toward the sea for a moment. "The funny thing is, I swear it is filled up on purpose—the top sealed with a granite slab that must be weighing a couple hundred kilos. So there is no dirt inside, only stones. Strange, eh?"

"Yes, strange."

Blake couldn't find anything more to say. He resumed his work, diligently scraping and brushing dirt and sand from his find. The Greek stood there for a moment, watching, while behind him the hot breeze whispered through the leaves of the olive trees. The sea lapped at the beach, just out of Blake's sight.

When he looked up, Spatakis was gone.

**T**he three o'clock whistle blew.

"Time to quit, old man," Larry Parker said.

He didn't look up. "No, there's more. I want to finish up a few more things." He couldn't take his eyes off the bones. The skeletons were clearly visible now, both curled in foetal positions and facing one another, each with an arm over the other's shoulder in a grisly embrace. Judging from the lack of wear on their teeth, these two had been young when they died—certainly not adults.

"Come on," Janice said. "They've been there for four thousand years. They'll keep another day. We're going swimming."

"Fine. I'll be along in a bit."

"You work too damn hard," she said.

He glanced up once as she was leaving. He saw Larry waiting a short distance off, and the two of them walked together. Like he and Janice had done when they'd first met, when they'd first been lovers. Now he could feel her slipping away, and he didn't know how to stop it.

"Yeah," he whispered to himself. "Too damn hard."

He threw himself into the work with a frantic energy that surprised him. When he finally looked up, it was only because stark shadows had fallen across the bones and he could scarcely tell his brush from the sand. He climbed out of the trench and stood looking west, across the dazzling sea. Waves ran with fingers of gold and silver. The sun hung low, slowly settling into the crease between two distant mountains.

The hot air stifled him. It never truly got cool in this part of Crete during the summer, not even at night. Then he began to gather up the blue plastic buckets sitting around the trench scarf.

A bit to his surprise, he found one labelled trench 13A, level 22—the same as the skeletons. The workmen must've moved it before he got there, then forgotten to put it back or tell him, he realized. And there was something dark inside it—something they'd found associated with the skeletons. Perhaps one of them had even been holding it when he died!

He knelt, puzzled, then reached into the bucket and took it out. It was a little clay juglike object. He had seen ones like it before: an ancient whistle. You put water inside to control the pitch. This one seemed in perfect condition. He held it in his hand, hefting it gently. He wondered what it would sound like, what it *had* sounded like, when some Bronze Age child or man had blown it last.

He scraped dirt off its side with his fingertip. There was a Linear B inscription, deep and plain, a single character: LIFE. And, of the other side, a second: DEATH.

"John Blake, my friend, you *do* work too hard."

Blake jumped, startled, and almost dropped the whistle. Spatakis stood at his side, suddenly.

"I didn't hear you come up."

"You missed a nice swim and cook-out on the beach. The others thought you went back to Sidia, but I wondered if I would not find you here. Still at the bones, eh?" He shrugged. "Janice

kept asking about you. Dedication is nice, but maybe you overdo it, perhaps?"

"Yeah, maybe I do." Without thinking, he slipped the whistle into his pocket.

The Greek wore a black men's bikini bathing suit, looking trim despite his age. *Ten years older than me and he looks ten years younger. It's not fair*, Blake thought. If only *he* looked like that, maybe ... He stood up wearily, his joints aching. He was suddenly and painfully aware that he'd managed to acquire a bad sunburn on the back of his neck.

"Well," Spatakis said, "we all plan to go to Sidia tonight. There's going to be bouzouki music in one of the cafés. Want to come?"

"No. I'm afraid I'd fall asleep in the middle of it. I'm much too tired."

"You sure you are all right?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Okay." Spatakis shrugged and went away.

In a little while Blake heard the expedition's Jeep start up, and the other members went bouncing over the rough road toward the town. The still, heavy air carried the sounds of their laughter for miles.

There was a tent by the excavation site. The idea had been, originally, that someone would always be there, on guard against foreign hippy thieves and gypsies, but that hadn't proven necessary. There were better, more easily accessible beaches about, and nobody came to Lommos except the archaeologists. Still, more than one expedition member had spent the night there, beneath the stars, listening to the lap of the waves and the hum of the cicadas. Blake didn't feel like walking into town; it would be easier to remain here. Then he could be up at dawn, working on the bones again.

When he got to the tent, he flopped down on the half-flat air mattress inside, then sat up again, abruptly, when he realized the juglike whistle was still in his pocket. Not that it would've mattered to anyone but him if he'd broken it: it could always be glued back together.

But the whistle wasn't damaged. He sat there on the mattress, cleaning it carefully with a pipe cleaner. When he had shaken the last dirt out, he blew into the little pouring-spout. Air passed

through, wheezing.

It was a strange fancy, something he couldn't account for, far stronger than a mere whim. Somehow it was important for him to know what this whistle had sounded like, back when it was held in ancient, living hands, and placed to living lips. What had it sounded like to those children—he was sure the skeletons were of children—who treasured it so much that one of them had taken it with him to the grave?

A fifty-liter plastic water-jug sat by the edge of the mattress. He unscrewed the lid and dipped out a handful of water, pouring a few drops into the whistle. All this was very unscientific. He realized, in a detached way, that it was completely insane for him to be playing games with a four-thousand-year-old children's toy. He didn't care. It took his mind off Larry and Janice.

The first sound from the whistle was a faint gurgling, but then there followed a surprisingly loud squeal, which leveled off into a low, soft sound like the cooing of a dove.

He took the whistle away from his lips and looked at it again in the fading light, running his fingers over the inscription. "Very well," he said aloud. "To life."

He blew again, a long, trailing note that seemed very beautiful. Then he listened, and he heard it echoing back from the distance, as if a dozen others took up the whistle's cry and repeated it again and again. He lay back on the mattress, and as he fell asleep, he wondered what on this flat, open expanse of land could possibly send an echo back.

**H**e dreamed of a bird of living, golden fire, rising slowly out of darkness, trilling the sounds he'd blown from the whistle: "Life, life, life, lifelife...." And, in his dream, he saw two figures, naked, dark, waiting hand-in-hand by the lip of the well in trench 19A.

The first one spoke, and the words were not English, nor Greek, nor any other tongue he knew. Yet he understood.

*"From death has been summoned life."*

The second spoke: *"The Bright God will rise again, and through Him eternity is possible. The sacrifice shall be accepted."*

Blake awoke, gasping. He thought he heard a footstep outside the tent.

*"Janice?"*

There was no reply.

Curious, not alarmed, he emerged from the tent. No one was around. The full moon rode high overhead, the sea gleaming with its light. It was nearly bright as day. He could almost see colors. The orange tent seemed white, the barren landscape a muted grey.

He thought he heard the whistling sound again. He patted his pockets for the clay whistle, then realized he'd left it inside the tent. He didn't go back for it, but instead walked on toward the middle of the site, weaving among the dark trenches.

Soon the temple complex spread out before him—eight feet below the present ground level lay the main building, four clay altars surrounding it. He could imagine the bloody sacrifices the ancient priests had once made to their gods. The rough stone walls—some of them seven feet high—cast stark shadows across the flagstones in the temple's main courtyard. Plastic pails, transparent plastic bags, and tools dotted the landscape, lending the place an oddly unreal look, like a movie set not quite ready for shooting. He never got tired of looking at a dig in progress. The view changed every day.

He heard the whistling again, clearly and distinctly. It came from beyond the temple. There were more trenches there; several houses, a storage room with a large pythos that hadn't yet been moved, Joe Spatakis's street—

And the well.

He ran, and as he did there was another sound, just as distinct: laughter. When he neared the trench with the well in it, the much talked-about 19A, he saw a light coming from it, a flickering glow like a small fire burning.

Vandals and thieves. It had to be. They'd never had such trouble before—why tonight to start?—but it couldn't be anything else. Could it? Somebody *had* to be in that trench!

He looked around for a weapon and picked up a good-sized rock, then made his way stealthily to the edge of the trench, wondering just what he was going to do with the rock if he needed it.

But no one stood in the trench, and there was no light. The well, however, wasn't as Spatakis had described it: gone was the huge slab of rock that covered the marble bench. Now the well gaped like an empty mouth. Someone had removed the stones inside.

Blake slid down to the trench floor in a shower of sand and pebbles, then touched the edge of the well hesitantly, half

afraid it would go away if he burst the illusion with his hand. But it was real, solid, and open. He could feel a faint wind rising from the darkness below. It didn't smell damp at all, but dry and musty.

*Of course. Something's been sealed up in there for four thousand years.*

Something?

He dropped his stone in. He didn't hear it strike bottom.

Once more he heard the whistle, its source close at hand. Then there came a脚步声. Gravel rattled.

He looked up, over the edge of the trench. That was when he wondered if he wasn't still dreaming.

A boy and a girl walked past in the night, oblivious to him, both about fifteen years old, naked, with deep brown skin and long blue-black hair. Their bodies gleamed with the moonlight. They weren't from Sidia, he was certain, any more than they were a part of the excavation. Their bodies were lithe and hard with muscle. They moved with the sinuous grace of dancers or acrobats, and as silently as ghosts.

In a moment they were both out of sight.

Again, the whistling sound.

Cautiously, he crept up out of the trench and followed them. They were heading toward the grove of olive trees where he'd had lunch that afternoon. The landscape was a tapestry of dark and light, of moonglow and shadow. He could see them in the moon's light. In shadows they disappeared as if they'd never been.

When he reached the olive trees he heard a low animal panting. He walked very slowly now, as quietly as he could, straining to see into the darkness beneath the trees. Something pale moved against a dark background. He crept closer, then stopped as he made out two people on the ground, naked, kissing, their arms around one another.

They were not the two he'd followed, but Larry and Janice.

It was something he'd always known might happen, that he would find them together like this, and now it was more blatant before him than he had ever imagined possible. He'd always wondered what he'd do, what he should do. Confront them? Fight with Larry (who would inevitably win) like one stag against another to determine who gets the available mate? He tried to tell himself he wasn't like that, not an animal, that Janice was a

person who made her own choices, not property.

She had chosen to betray him. For a long time he had pretended he hadn't known. Now—

He backed away, only half-aware of what he was doing, trying to walk backward in time, to a point at which this had never happened. It was an evasion, a pretense, and he knew it. But he hoped that if he tried hard enough, he'd no longer know the truth.

Then he saw the Greek boy and girl again, on the other side of the grove, standing a little apart. They were hardly visible at all, against the darkness of the olive trees, but they were definitely there, watching with an expectancy he found terrifying. He watched too. He couldn't turn away.

Janice was panting. She and Larry were making love now, approaching climax. She called Larry's name. The Greeks watched. Blake watched, shocked, horrified, sickened.

Suddenly the whistling sound came again, very loud, very near. Janice screamed. Larry looked up, wide-eyed. Something intensely bright, like thousands of magnesium flares all burning together, roared through the trees. For an instant Blake saw the flaming, golden bird of his dream. Then, for no more than a second's glimpse, there stood a huge figure like a man with wings and streaming hair, with an aura of fire all around him. The fire lost its shape, became a pillar of flames too bright to look upon. He saw it rising in the middle of the clearing, Larry and Janice caught like insects within it, writhing, their bodies black. Then he could see no more. He covered his eyes and fell to the ground.

**H**e hadn't fainted. There was no sense of returning consciousness. It was more as if a segment of time had been removed from his life. After such a gap, he grew aware that the grove was dark, and silent but for the occasional cry of a night bird.

He got up unsteadily. The Greeks had vanished. Larry and Janice had vanished. No sign of any fire remained, no smell of smoke.

He considered the possibility that he was losing his mind. He found the idea strangely comforting.

A little way from where he'd last seen Larry, the Minoan wine press they'd used for a picnic table gleamed as a stray bit of moonlight touched it. He staggered over and sat down. At least the huge stone was real and solid. That, too, was comforting.

He glanced down at the ground. Something caught his eyes.

Leaning over, he picked it up, then dropped it suddenly, as though he'd grasped a viper.

It was a human femur, cold as ice, with the smooth texture of polished ivory. He'd felt a bone like that before, in his trench. But this bone, he knew, hadn't come from the site. It was too large, too obviously that of an adult, too fresh.

This bone had come to mock him by its very proximity. This bone and the body it belonged to.

And the bone wasn't burned. Somehow, he'd expected that.

Again he felt a dislocation. His mind simply blanked out for a time. When his awareness resumed, he was back in the tent, panting for breath, trembling all over, trying to hold back tears. He'd read somewhere that when you get a terrible injury—when a soldier gets shot, for instance—there is a period of grace, a kind of stunned shock before it all becomes real and the pain is felt. He'd neared the end of such a period now, he thought.

He felt around beside the air mattress and found the ancient whistle. He knew what he had to do, somehow, before the pain overwhelmed him. *From death can be summoned life.* He saw it all now: the start of an immortality cult, the priest in the mosaic making a sacrifice to his god, jealous, fearful neighbors destroying Lommos before the new god's influence could spread—

*From death can be summoned life.* He shuddered. Then he opened the plastic jug and poured water into the whistle, spilling far more than he got into the toy.

He crawled out of the tent, holding the whistle gingerly, then stood up in the darkness. The moon had set. The bright Milky Way stretched from horizon to horizon in the perfectly clear, perfectly dark sky. The stars were brilliant, unflickering points.

He thought of Janice. He could not bring himself to speak her name aloud. He thought of her as if she were gone, as if she were dead, as if he mourned for her.

He raised the whistle to his lips and blew a high, trailing note. He listened for a long time, for the fading echo, as if the sound were a living thing, fleeing from him, racing across the island.

Then there was only a silence more profound than any he had ever known, even as the night sky was darker, the stars brighter than any he had ever seen. He was like one newly born into an elemental, empty world, experiencing every little thing for

the first time.

When the change came, he felt it before he saw it, something like a chill in the air but no mere cold. It rose around him like desert sand in a whirling wind: flashes of color, sparkles of light, bits of red and blue and gold. The stars rippled, like a reflection in a lake when a stone is thrown in. The landscape shifted in the periphery of his vision, in a way he could not define, again, and again, and again, until he was dizzy from the seeming motion of it.

He stared in a mixture of amazement and resignation, as if he somehow knew this was to happen, as if it were an elemental part of the night—walls rose around him, square-beamed doorways, a cobbled street to his left, all suddenly revealed like something seen through a melting mist. Before him a huge, open plaza stretched into shadowy distance. Beyond it stood the temple complex, not as he remembered it, not as a bare scattering of stone walls and foundation with four baked-clay altars in front, but as he had *imagined* it, looming, a twisted pile of wood and stone, the red tiled roof curved like a cripple's leg.

For an instant he still saw the Sidia excavation like a ghostly, half-transparent thing, and then it was gone and he stood alone among the strange, very solid buildings, listening to the wind rush through the maze-like streets.

He tried, for a brief instant, to be an archeologist, not to question *how* this impossible thing had happened, but to study it. He was, after all, being afforded an opportunity unique in the annals of science. What good were a few old shards when he could actually see the place as the Minoans had, millennia before?

But that was absurd and he knew it. He thought of Janice and the pain of her betrayal focused his mind on the real matter at hand. He could not bring himself to blame her. He tried to tell himself it was all that bastard Larry's fault.

He still held the whistle. In the starlight, he could still make out the inscriptions, LIFE and DEATH. He had blown the whistle once—he didn't really know why—perhaps in a pathetic attempt to bring Janice back, not as the traitor to his marriage, but as she had been once. Instead, he stood in a phantom city.

He licked dry lips, swallowed, and blew the whistle again, slowly, deliberately, softly at first, then harder and harder.

Almost immediately he saw the change.

Shadows passed around him. The street filled with the

flicker of moving figures not-quite-there. Their voices came in whispers, in echoes, like something from a cave, distorted by the depth and distance until the sound was almost like the faint rushing of surf on a beach far away. He could hear the flap-flap of their sandals on the cobblestones, and the soft rustle of their clothing. He could *almost* see them.

He stretched out a hand to touch them. Laughing, they moved away, flowing down the street like smoke in a brisk wind. He stumbled after them, then ran toward the temple complex.

There, people faded into view around him, one, another, then dozens, hundreds, clad in sweeping ceremonial robes of blue and red wool, like the ones he'd seen in frescoes.

They were chanting, but he could not make out the words, for all their language was liquid and sibilant, more powerful, somehow more *alive* than ever English could be.

They circled around him in a kind of dance, before the great oak doors of the temple. Fingers light as cobwebs brushed his face, his arms.

Then the dancing stopped, and they cleared a path before him.

He saw Janice. She stood just to the right of the temple doors. Larry was with her. He reached for her hand.

"*Don't!*" he shouted. "Please! I still love you!"

But she took Larry by the hand without any hesitation. The doors swung inward. Within, the high priests waited, and fires burned on the altars of the gods.

Still the people chanted and sang, and now he could make out some of the words, and, inexplicably, as he had in his dream, understood them.

The people celebrated the sacred marriage of flesh with eternal fire.

"Larry—damn you! No!"

Screaming, he ran forward. Hands tried to stop him, but he brushed past. He reached the temple's doors. Taking alarm, perhaps at the sight of him, perhaps at an evil omen, the priests heaved the doors shut in his face.

But he passed through, into the lurid, flickering semi-darkness, among the flames as shadows, and Janice and Larry stood naked before an altar. He shouted and ran forward and looked around frantically for something to use as a weapon, for something to throw. He glimpsed a jug on a tabletop and grabbed for it, but

his hand passed through the jug, and through the table also, neither any more substantial than cobwebs.

He was the phantom now. He screamed and wept and called out his wife's name. An acolyte looked up suddenly, then turned back to the ceremony, as if unsure he had heard anything more than the wind or a creaking beam.

Janice and Larry stepped up onto the altar and embraced in the midst of the flames.

At the last instant Blake's hand almost crushed the clay whistle. Then he realized with a shock what he had nearly done, and set the whistle to his lips once more. He blew hard, desperately, without any attempt to control the sound. First there was a shriek, then only a sputtering as he blew the last of the water out of the little clay toy.

He closed his eyes, and his knees folded up, and he fell to the floor, sitting awkwardly. He slammed the whistle against the flagstones, his hand open, feeling no pain as the clay shattered against his palm.

The agony within him was real enough, however. His raw, wailing scream was hardly even a human sound. That, too, was as unique and as primal as the stars and the sky and the darkness of the night.

**W**hen it was morning, he found himself lying face down among the pebbles and dirt, in the middle of the excavation. Trench 13A, level 22. Four skeletons lay there now. The bones were not burned.

# *The Liquor Cabinet of Dr. Malikudzu*

by MARC LAIDLAW

What was the harm of  
taking a little nip  
if nobody knew?  
Who could it hurt?

Bad news for the janitor; good luck for Dr. Malikudzu. Sometime in the middle of the night-shift, after a fight with Max the supervisor over who was to empty biohazard bins in the animal experimentation labs, young Mr. Coover let go his already slender grip on discretion and began unadvisedly opening random drawers in the offices of the principal investigators. He had seen too many bad things peeking at him emptily from the plastic shrouded hollows of the laboratory bins; he wanted to know what got into the heads of these doctors to make them go after living meat the way they did. Drawer after drawer yielded nothing but paper and paperclips, the occasional stash of change for the vending machines, stale fragments of pastry. But finally, in the office of one Dr. Malikudzu, he came upon a cache of tiny liquor bottles, of the sort distributed by airlines. With a grin he settled back in the squeaky office chair, unscrewed the cap on a vodka bottle, and tipped the contents down his throat, never noticing that the paper seal on the neck of the bottle had already been broken.

It burned like vodka going down, but the taste was all wrong. And at the bottom young Mr. Coover was unsettled to find that it had dregs—namely a little rubbery bit like a cheese curd, which slipped past his tongue before he could spit it out. Bleh! He held the bottle up to the light, but there was nothing remaining in it to suggest that it had ever held anything but what it claimed.

Suddenly queasy, he scarcely had time to drop the bottle back

into the drawer—knocking over several others as if they were bowling pins—and stagger to his rolling garbage can, therein disgorging all that he had drunk and quite a bit more besides. He hung weakly over the rim of the huge reeking barrel, his mops and brooms clattering to the floor, and waited there in case his stomach might surge again. He felt as if he were breaking out in pins, his stomach seared by acids. His eventual thought was that things would be complicated if he were discovered in this office, where the drawers had obviously been ransacked. To hell with straightening up—he was sick. He had meant to quit anyway, now that he'd saved some money. Let them try to track him down. Doctors weren't supposed to keep wet bars in their drawers; he probably wouldn't be reported. But Max, his superior, was another matter.

He stooped to recover his brooms and mops, and his guts seized the opportunity to stab him without mercy. Then he staggered from the office, pushing his cart and barrel ahead of him through aisles of black acid-proof countertops lined with glassware and fancy instruments that looked like televisions without screens. His stomach spasmed, forcing a scream from him. The sound echoed through the lab, brittle and cold as the Pyrex. He thought he heard an answering cry from down the hall. Was Max coming to check up on him?

Get out of here now. Out of here. It sounded like there was a jungle in the walls, apes screaming; but that beating of metal bars would have been out of place in the wild.

He pushed against another door, this one with a yellow pane set in it. Locked. He fished out his skeleton key, ignoring the warning symbols on the glass. Something more than biohazards here. He pushed the door open and the screech of animals overwhelmed him. Monkeys stared at him from rows of unlit cages: unlit, but their eyes glowed with a sick yellow light, the color of the glass pane. In fact, the pane was clear; this yellow radiance had colored it.

"Oh God . . ." He put a hand to his belly, rubbed gently, wishing the pain would stop. He had swallowed something, he knew. Something like a tequila worm, but still alive. It was roaming around inside him, not bothering to follow the twists and turns of his guts—no, it was boring a way straight through. The shortest way to a man's heart . . .

At that thought, he knew that it had found this most prized



muscle. A hot yellow exultance swept through him—alien to his thoughts, but arising alongside them. His heart quivered and there came a soft jabbing. No more pain. The muscle stopped beating, his eyes bulged, and then the organ throbbed and went to work at a far different pace. His blood flooded with yellow light; it spilled from his eyes and lit the dark corners.

He smiled. A man was calling him, coming down the hall. Max.

"Coover? What are you doing in there? It's your ass this time, boy. We don't clean these rooms."

Young Mr. Coover met him at the door. His heart beat a rapid yellow accompaniment to the stifled gasp, the wet rending of muscle and bone, and the arrhythmic sound of dribbling on the easy-to-clean linoleum tile.

This done, Mr. Coover found one of the larger cages in a corner of the room and opened the wire mesh door. The occupant gazed at him with soulful yellow eyes, understanding why he must squeeze it by the throat until the vertebrae were mingled in the cooling jellies of the neck. His eyes shone all the more brightly as he climbed into the cage and pulled the door shut after him. Then, until morning, he sulked and howled like all the rest.

It was a short trip from the simian labs to the psychiatric institute. Dr. Leslie Malikudzu watched from his high office window as the strait-jacketed figure of the young janitor was led around the back of the opposite building by several security men and three white-coated doctors. He could still see the boy's eyes in his memory: the faint residue of luminescence dying from them in the daylight. He had neglected to mention the empty Vodka bottle to the police. Now he returned to the drawer and examined the other bottles in order to ascertain that they were in fact all quite full of stasis fluid, and that the tiny flesh niblets inside each remained immobile.

Thank God the janitor had drunk the stuff, he thought; must have held quite a kick, too. He hated to think of what might have happened had the bottle broken on the floor and the flesh-tag escaped. It could have struck from anywhere. Now, however, it was safely lodged in a companionable heart; its presence, he had determined, had struck the boy dumb, driven him utterly mad. It seemed doubtful that he would ever regain speech sufficient to describe how he had been driven to murder his supervisor and the

ape whose cage he'd occupied. This was fortunate for Dr. Malikudzu, who was still years away from publishing his tentative findings, and much farther than that from asking permission of the Human Experimentation Committee to pursue his work into animals of a higher order. The Simian Commission did not know exactly what he had done to the apes now in his keeping; or rather, the experiments they had authorized were not the ones he had conducted, although they bore a superficial resemblance. He could thank Mr. Coover that his work had been accelerated by perhaps a decade and its benefits to him might be immediately forthcoming.

He only required access to the patient himself. If the doctors across the street were close with their unpublished data, they were more so with their high-risk inmates. In cases such as this, Coover might not remain there long at all. The psychologists would argue that he needed mental care, the police that he should be treated as a criminal. Before this argument could get underway there were some tests he would very much like to run on the fellow.

Poor fellow! He allowed himself a moment of compassion, then reminded himself that the janitor was very likely a drunk, not to mention a pilferer. Well, the tag would have a grand old time with him, wouldn't it?

Dr. Malikudzu had his assistant place a few calls, which required interrupting the gossip over the grisly murder and the breakage of several astronomically priced pieces of analytic equipment. Finally he was connected with Dr. Gavin Shiel, financial director of the psychiatric institute. Shiel had a doctorate in economics, and equally important to his status, he had graduated from Cornell with top honors in Hotel Administration.

"Gavin, how are you? You've heard about that ghastly business in my lab I suppose. They've brought the young man to your place and I wondered if I could see him."

"Good to hear from you, Les. Awful business. I'm not sure who's handling the case. It's urgent, you say? Why don't you run over and ask for a minute with him?"

"I'd like to, but you know your staff. Quite rigorous on protocol. He did just murder a man, you realize. I wondered if you might oil the water a bit, advise them that I'm coming. Otherwise I'll have to get into this terrible hassle over privacy, privileges, medical jurisdiction."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'll call Therese Dowsie. Should

be straightened out by the time you can get over here."

"Wonderful. Let's get together for lunch sometime soon."

Dr. Malikudzu whizzed down to the lobby in the elevator, dashed through a light drizzle and crossed the street, threading between two beacon-flashing ambulances that were stalled at the emergency parking entrance while a mailroom messenger gathered up a spill of envelopes. By the time he entered the other bulding, a nurse named Linda was waiting for him at the elevator. With her key in a coded lock, they were given access to the middle of the crisis ward. The hall was full of wandering patients. An older man with sunken black eyes informed Dr. Malikudzu that he had always loved him. It was impossible to separate staff from patients; there were no alienating white coats in this ward. Dr. Malikudzu was only mildly suprised when Linda began railing at the young man behind the reception desk, telling him that he should be in his room and not answering phones. Before he slipped away, however, she asked him the whereabouts of Dr. Dowsie, and the patient pointed down the end of the hall. They passed out of the ward, checking that the door locked behind them, into an area of much higher security.

A policeman stood in the hall, talking with the proud Dr. Dowsie, a tall black woman who now began berating the cop for "waving his gun around where it wasn't wanted." When she saw Dr. Malikudzu, her only greeting was, "You."

"I know you're expecting me."

"Gavin made it clear that I was to let you see the new boy. You know how he reasons—with a checkbook. I don't see what business it is of yours really."

"He was found in my lab."

"So what?"

"I'm investigating a disappearance."

"You're not going to get anything out of him. Besides, his hands were empty when they brought him in. I'm trying to get his evaluation started."

"Is he sedated?"

"We had to sedate him. You heard him howling."

"But did the drugs work?"

A sudden yell answered his question. It sounded like the door might open from the blast. The cop backed away and started walking down the hall shaking his head; he was headed toward the crisis ward.

"Linda, show him out. I'll let Dr. Malikudzu in." She unlocked the door with a deadpan expression.

"I'd like a few minutes alone if you don't mind."

"Be my guest."

Inside, the smell of urine and feces was as strong as the blast of sound. Difficult to imagine such fierce emanations from such a small man. Fortunately, Dr. Malikudzu was quite accustomed to the reek of hominid effluvia. Coover had crawled back into a corner of the couch, and there he lay with his head thrown back, raging at the ceiling, only occasionally glancing down at the man who had come to share his cell. There was no more yellow gleam in the boy's eyes; they seemed entirely burnt out.

"I know you're in there," Dr. Malikudzu said, not that the flesh-tag implicitly understood human speech. Still, there was a chance that it might have infiltrated the boy's speech centers and joined forces with him. These were all things he had hoped to ascertain with human subjects.

He took a bottle of Puerto Rican rum from his pocket and held it up to young Coover's face. The boy quieted instantly, staring into the depths of stasis fluid at the floating speck within, a bit of twisted flesh that resembled nothing so much as a kidney bean.

"Ah, recognition! I could inject you with this fluid, you know—a needle to the heart—and stop your thrashing about in this unfortunate lad. But then there would be an autopsy. There might be one anyway if you're not careful to live. We must give you time yet to heal. The entry wounds must be painful, yes?" He got close enough to the boy to see blood inside his lips, but it was hard to tell if he'd done that by gnashing his teeth or whether it might have come up from his interior. "Do you know what you've got in there? Perhaps I should ask, do you know what you are?"

He was thrilled by the notion that he might actually be communicating with the flesh-tag for the first time. His simian models had been disappointing in this regard. In fact, in none of them had he seen such extreme reactions. As he'd always suspected, the human organism was the only one that would allow the tags to take their full effect. Which meant ... the ends of his efforts might be in sight!

"You are a cancer," he said. "A bit of self-consuming flesh. Or rather, that's what you were until I got ahold of you. Now you're something rather more special than that. In a sense, I am your father."

The boy stared deep into his eyes, head jerking rapidly.

"Yes I am. You should be pleased that your sire is such a genius. It hasn't been easy to pursue this work. I've had four separate rotating groups of graduate students working with me, all of them unaware of the other groups, all convinced—like my patrons—that they were working toward quite different ends. It's been a jigsaw puzzle, you see, in which only I hold the key piece. I've had to invest a bit of unpaid time myself, but I don't mind. The exposure to radiation, the messing about with chimerae, all part of the job. Do you remember, I tried sending you messages once before? I wrote amusing little codes into chromosomes and let them replicate within your genetic predecessor. I thought you might catch on and reply in kind. Perhaps you're not that intelligent. Perhaps you're nothing more than a malignant worm after all."

The boy kept nodding, a slather of blood on his chin. Suddenly his eyes rolled back and he slumped in a faint, relaxing the rest of his bodily control. The smell worsened only slightly. Dr. Malikudzu backed away, uncapping the rum and dribbling a bit of stasis fluid over the couch—where it could hardly be distinguished from the rest of the slime—while he shook the tiny tag into the palm of his hand. He pinched it by one end and dropped it into the boy's yawning mouth.

Instantly young Coover's jaws snapped shut with such ferocity that his teeth were in danger of shattering. The boy's throat began to tremble, ripple, and the passage of the tag was marked by the heaving of the chest. There was a lull during which the doctor capped the bottle and slipped it back into his pocket. Then Coover slid from the bed and became a sodden, stinking heap on the floor. A gibbering heap.

Dr. Malikudzu knocked lightly on the door and Dr. Dowsie opened it. "Had enough?"

"I think so. The sedatives seem to have taken effect. Keep me posted, will you? I'd like to stop in this afternoon if that's all right."

"He might be in jail this afternoon. I'm trying to see it doesn't happen."

Dr. Malikudzu bit his lip. That would be unfortunate. He didn't know anyone at the jailhouse who might let him in.

"Best of luck," he said.

"I still don't understand your interest in this kid," she said.

"What's he to you?"

He glanced at his watch. "Sorry, I've got an appointment with the Chancellor. Shall we talk later?"

She shook her head and called a nurse to let him off the ward.

**H**is phone rang at 3:30, as he sat with his collection of little liquor bottles arrayed on the desk before him.

"Malikudzu? This is Therese Dowsie—"

"Dr. Dowsie, I was just going to call you. How is our patient? Not taken from our arms yet. I hope."

"He's not going anywhere. There's no way to restrain him. I think the cops are afraid to touch him."

"Why, what's happened?"

His heart, which had finally slowed after the events of the morning, now began to beat faster than ever. His dreams were coming true so suddenly!

"I don't know exactly what's going on. He seems to be ... deteriorating ... quite rapidly."

"Please describe."

"Bone structure is liquifying. His skin is mottled, as if something's sucking up the melanin; looks like someone spilled bleach all over him. And his eyes ... God, it's like looking at an octopus. They still blink. They're yellow. We tried to move him an hour ago and he just sort of ... sort of oozed out of his clothes and the strait-jacket. He's still intact, somehow metabolising, though I don't think he can breathe. I wondered if you might have any idea how his happened. You seemed so interested in him this morning. It's become plain to me that this is not a mental problem."

"It sounds ... terrible." He had almost said "wonderful." "Shall I come over and have a look?"

"If you don't mind."

"Glad to."

Dr. Dowsie herself was waiting to take him up to the ward. This time, unfortunately, she chose to accompany him into the room. He would have liked time alone with the remains. Perhaps it could still be arranged.

"I think you should call Gavin Shiel," he said. "A higher authority seems necessary now. A new stage in treatment."

"Treatment?" She looked considerably aged; her words were

shrieked. "What can you do for that?"

She had seen too much at once, without forewarning. He had expected something like this . . . this malign jelly. The two tags had met, given the proper host, and powered by their fusion they were eating what had once been Mr. Coover from the inside out—like earthworms processing soil, they were eating but not destroying him. They were transforming an ordinary old life into an amazing new form. It was wonderful. He prodded at it with his foot, trying to locate the brain center. Abruptly it opened a pair of golden eyes and winked at him.

"My God, did you see that? I can't take any more of this." Dr. Dowsie bolted from the room, forgetting to shut it behind her. He heard her tennis shoes squeaking down the hall.

Dr. Malikudzu had come prepared. As he stooped toward the mass he said, "Intelligent, aren't we? More intelligent than Mr. Coover, I'd imagine, hm?"

The jelly shook faintly, as if in accord.

"And hardy? Durable? Life, perhaps, everlasting? As difficult to eradicate as cancer itself?"

He had located brain, heart, liver—other major organs. The lungs seemed to have lost their utility. He extracted a long scalpel and began to stroke randomly at the surface of the thing; it was like trying to slice pudding. The slits closed instantly. He stabbed the brain half a dozen times, executing neat twirling trepanning gestures deep in the cortex, but all without effect. The eyes narrowed, staring more brightly than before. Liver, heart, nothing was harmed by his knife—and in fact he was positive that all the organs were moment by moment becoming less differentiated. This quivering protoplasm was life itself, nothing less.

"Fire might do you in," he said, and it gave him such a look that he almost pitied it. "I wish I could carry you away from here to a safe place. With time we might learn to speak to each other. But I'm afraid I'd need a large bucket for that task—something like one of your custodial drums. There isn't the time. So many experiments don't quite pan out. Eventually, however, we will succeed. I think that personally my chances are excellent."

He bowed slightly, stepping back as the mass extended a pseudopod and flowed toward him, flexing resilient tissue that fell somewhere between muscle and bone in organization and function. He could see it taking on new forms, working out new definitions, discovering itself. He could see how strong it might eventually

become. If it lived that long.

They would kill it, of course. They always did. With fire or water or chemical reagents. The world was hard on foundlings.

He turned to the exit, left ajar by Dr. Dowsie, but somehow Coover got ahead of him. A thick snakey arm slipped under the door and drew it shut. There was no latch on the inside.

Dr. Malikudzu regarded the arm with curiosity. It ended in a flat, paddlelike hand from which a dozen wriggling fingers sprouted. Shifting, liquefiant, the arm now thrust itself into the air like a fleshy cobra wishing to shake hands. It swayed toward him, thrusting past his half-hearted parry. He was keen to see what it would do.

What it did was cover his mouth. A scream was out of the question. The cupped palm exerted a slight suction on his lips, drawing them open as it gripped his jaw. Several fingers explored his gums, his tongue, and finally came to rest atop the edges of his teeth. In the center of the room, watching him from a distance, the yellow eyes of the cancer flared. The grip tightened. His teeth snapped together, severing the fingertips inside his mouth. For a moment they lay cold and oozing on his tongue, until arousing themselves, they made quickly for the passages of soft tissue and began their burrowing odyssey toward his heart.

This journey had begun with cocktails. If only it could have ended half so pleasantly.

# Books

by AL SARRANTONIO

*Nukes* edited by John Maclay;  
Maclay & Associates, 1986, \$4.95.

*Hiroshima* by John Hersey;  
Bantam, 1986, \$2.95.

I once read a story in an Alfred Hitchcock collection, told in the second person, in which the narrator told me, the reader, that he was out to get me. And, he further told me, he *had* gotten me; the very pages I was holding as I read his words had been specially bound into the book and had been impregnated with a tactile poison that, even as I read his words, was killing me. I would be dead in minutes.

It was a brilliant, thrilling story. But I doubt I would have been as thrilled had it been true.

There are, you see, two kinds of fear.

I've listened, in both print and person, to various practitioners of the craft of horror fiction talk about why people like to be scared—why, in particular, they read the stuff these horror writers create. And, psychology and terminology aside, the consensus seems to be at root a simple one: people read horror fiction to thrill in the macabre once-removed, to think about what's Out There without having to step Out There and find out—in other words, to experience fear vicariously.

That's one kind of fear. There is, of course, another.

Most people don't like the other kind, because it's real. It isn't safe, or fun, and you can't close the book and make it go away. It *is* the boogeyman, not his shadow. And, when it wears a mushroom head, people don't even want to think about it.

The first kind of fear is very popular, because it's entertaining and dramatic.

The other kind of fear isn't very popular, because it's depressing, and it could really happen.

You have to fool people into thinking about it.

What you have to do, I'm convinced, is dramatize it.

Except by Tudors, William Shakespeare was never accused of history. And yet his Richard III is so ingrained in the popular consciousness that the real Richard, hardly the monster the play so graphically depicts, may never emerge. (I direct anyone willing to be enlightened and enthralled by the subject of Richard to Josephine Tey's excellent mystery novel, *Daughter of Time*.) The concept of nuclear war is vastly more monstrous than any regal hunchback, but just as susceptible to artful dramatization. And more in need of it.

This is not a frivolous idea. We cannot become intellectually involved in that with which we are emotionally disengaged. How do you think the ratings of the television movie *The Day After* compared to the various documentaries on the same subject, such as the NBC White Paper of a few years ago, or the recent WTBS presentation of the nonfiction *Dark Circle: Secrets of the Atomic Age*? How ingrained in the public mind are any of the documentary facts compared to the stark TV image of tall mushroom clouds blooming in a clear sky over Lawrence, Kansas?

I've read Jonathan Schell's important book *The Fate of the Earth*, and as much as I could of Freeman Dyson's even more vital *Weapons and Hope*. But, God help me, I can't remember one statistic, one figure of megatonnage, one closely reasoned argument from either of them half as well as I remember vivid scenes from the novels *Alas, Babylon*, *Earth Abides* or *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.

You want to make them think about the other kind of fear, you've got to give them drama.

John Maclay, editor and publisher of *Nukes: Four Horror Writers on the Ultimate Horror*, gives us lots of drama. What he's done (and he a publisher, yet!) is forgotten that the safe money lies with the first kind of fear, and dared to print a book that tackles the other kind.

The four stories, by J. N. Williamson, Joe R. Lansdale, Jessica A. Salmonson, and Mort Castle, are strong-imaged, sometimes stomach-churning. Williamson offers an effective meditation on the immediate aftermath of a nuclear strike on a city akin to Lawrence, Kansas. It is marred only by an occasional lapse into italics prose ("There's no WAY you can do anything—except add to the body count!") and a rather startling slide into ghetto cliché near the end. "And of Gideon" by Mort Castle unflinchingly ex-

amines a postnuclear world which perfectly suits a protagonist normally relegated to the most questionable fringes of what is considered human.

The other two stories, by Lansdale and Salmonson, form the soul of the book. Joe Lansdale's "Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back," besides being one of the best-titled stories of the year, contains enough ideas and narrative power for at least one novel, possibly two or three. Its diarist narrator, a bomb scientist unlucky enough to make it underground with his wife when the missiles begin to fly, resurfaces to find an Earth which will never wake from its man-imposed nightmare, where the oceans have boiled away, leaving a cracked, black sea-bottom:

Besides the whales I suppose I should mention I saw a shark once. It was slithering along at a great distance and the tip of its fin was winking in the sunlight. I've also seen some strange, legged fish and some things I could not put a name to. I'll just call them food since I saw one of the whales dragging his bottom jaw along the ground one day, scooping up the creatures as they tried to beat a hasty retreat.

The story is compact, supercharged, angry. The image of the scientist's dead daughter, away from the underground shelters at college when war broke out, has been tattooed painfully into the narrator's back by his never-forgiving wife, a former artist; later in the story, the daughter herself is conjured up by the diarist:

The mirror grew bright and Rae's smile went from ear to ear—literally—and the flesh on her bones seemed like crepe paper before a powerful fan, and that fan blew the hair off her head, the skin off her skull and melted those beautiful, blue eyes and those shiny white teeth ...

Jessica Salmonson's "The View from Mount Futaba" is reflective, sad, of award caliber. In it, a Buddhist nun, widow of a samurai, is transported forward in time during a battle with an evil priest (he climbs a hill to face her, dragging the corpses of two lovers he has murdered tied to either leg) to Hiroshima at the moment of the conflagration of August 6, 1945. She believes the priest has sent her, as promised, to hell:

Siting beneath the bridge she saw a human-shaped black thing, oozing fluids, buzzing with flies. It was sitting with the burnt stumps of something resembling feet in thick gray water. Was it a human tortured to death by devils? Was it a devil?

She continues her journey, which will eventually take her back to her own time, to face the priest whose evil pales next to what she witnesses in a post-bomb Hiroshima:

There was a skinless man, like the skinless dog, who stood in one place. Dangling from his fingertips was the skin of his arms, inverted like gloves.

For those who might argue that John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, as non-fiction, is not drama, I quickly offer in comparison to the Salmonson quotation preceeding, the following excerpt, concerning one of Hersey's subjects, Mr. Tanimoto:

He reached down and took a woman by the hands, but her skin slipped off in huge, glovelike pieces.

Or this, which might easily have come from Joe R. Lansdale's story, but which concerns Father Kleinsorge, another of Hersey's principals:

When he had penetrated the bushes, he saw there were about twenty men, and they were all in exactly the same nightmarish state: their faces were wholly burned, their eyesockets were hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks.

In 1985, forty years after the Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, and thirty-nine years after his essay first appeared in *The New Yorker*, John Hersey went back to find out what happened to the six survivors whose stories he chronicled. The new material, published as Chapter Five of a new editon of *Hiroshima*, and titled "Aftermath," adds by a third to the original. Regrettably, it destroys the tenor of the book as initially published.

It's not that the new material isn't interesting, or deserving of

publication. It's fascinating, and moving, to read of the selfless life and eventual, painful death of the Jesuit Father Kleinsorge, or the shockingly amusing story of how Kiyoshi Tanimoto was bamboozled into appearing on the television program "This is Your Life" with Captain Robert Lewis, copilot of the Enola Gaey. It's just that the original book, which transcended reportage, was such a delicate whole, such a perfect journalistic prose poem—was so effective and *dramatic*—that Hersey's addition of a jarring coda seems unnecessary—as if an addendum to *Moby Dick* found Ishmael forty years later, working in the Fulton Fish Market, still haunted by that white whale. "Aftermath" should have been published as a magazine article, or, if appearing with the rest of the story, as a definitely separate piece, not integrated with the rest. As is, it has the effect of a high school reunion, disorienting the past, and, often, diluting its significance. The overwhelming sadness (there is sadness, more than anything, in the initial essay; amidst the courage, and struggle for retention of human dignity, and the horror, there is melancholy most of all, shared and conveyed by the author—a sadness mirrored by Jessica Salmonson's story in *Nukes*) is somehow trivialized, the drama conventionalized, by Hersey committing what really amounts to a sequel.

*Hiroshima*, as Hersey conceived it forty years ago, is a perfect book. *Nukes* is not a perfect book. Grammar often takes a beating; occasionally, the prose gets a little out of hand. But even with its weaknesses, the volume as a statement, including Maclay's own Introduction and Afterword, is a marvelous achievement, one which should be supported. (Maclay is a small publisher; I therefore give you his address: Maclay & Associates, Inc., P.O. Box 16253, Baltimore, MD 21210.) *Nukes* numbers 92 pages (another courageous thing for a publisher to attempt these days: a book of horror fiction that weighs less than a roast beef); *Hiroshima*, even with Chapter Five, numbers only 152 pages; the two together cost under eight dollars.

Very little money for a lot of drama, to fool yourself into thinking about the other kind of fear.

# Film

by T.E.D. KLEIN

## A mean green mother from outer space

*Little Shop of Horrors*

Directed by Frank Oz

Produced by David Geffen

Are breasts funny? Normally you wouldn't think so, would you? I mean, they're just *there*, part of a woman's usual complement of equipment. They may excite interest or ennui; you may find them sexy or merely so-what? But chances are you don't find anything particularly *funny* about them.

But Ellen Green's breasts, a considerable portion of whose surface areas are on display throughout *The Little Shop of Horrors*, are a major source of the movie's comedy. They're the female equivalent of an unzipped fly; they're so absurdly prominent squeezed into impossible cleavages by a push-up bra and practically popping from the scoop-neck dresses she toddles around in, that they tend to undercut all the sweetly solemn inanities the poor girl, if you'll pardon the expression, utters.

These inanities, incidentally, are uttered in one of the most endearingly dumb accents this side of Barbara Nichols—an extreme species of New Yorkese that shuns the letter "r" ("in the gutter" comes out "in da guddah"), usually substituting a "w" for it ("Seymaw" for "Seymour") but sometimes venturing even further afield, into a veritable "v," culminating in eyebrow-raisers such as "Seymaw, yaw hysterical!" and "It'd be a mivacle." The result is something curiously sexy, in a trashy sort of way—a bizarre linguistic hybrid of Marilyn Monroe and Elmer Fudd.

As I recall, the comic actress Jackie Joseph used much the

same accent—and displayed some of the same cleavage—in the original 1960 film version of *Little Shop*, which I happened upon some twenty-five years ago on New York local TV. It contained one memorable scene, not included in the present film, in which the fleeing Seymour hides out in a toilet factory, his head at last emerging from one of the bowls. That really broke me up; but then, I was in junior high school at the time.

As you're probably aware, the original version also featured a somewhat crueler ending, one that was reproduced in the off-Broadway musical on which the new film is based. It's an ending in which evil triumphs and true love conquers nothing. I've never had much taste for tales like this, in which hapless little people end up being defeated by forces greater than themselves; there's more than enough of that in real life, thank you. And so considering how sweet and essentially innocent the film's two main characters are, I'm just as happy with the current, more sentimental ending. (Hey, it's just a *fantasy*, for God's sake!) One thing that is lost as a result, however, is a catchy musical number called "Don't Feed the Plants," with which the theatrical version ends. It's basically a song of warning, sending each spectator home convinced that the show's carnivorous plants are about to descend on his own neighborhood.

To the filmmakers' credit, however, they had the decency and good sense to cast Ellen Greene in the same role she originated off-Broadway. They could have cast a bigger name like Teri Garr or Gilda Radner or, God help us, Goldie Hawn, but, *miracle of miracles*, they decided to stick with a winner. Greene has a strong, supple singing voice (in contrast to the little-girl squeak she affects while speaking), and she's the only character in the film who actually comes alive—quite touchingly so, in fact—when, in her one love scene, she belts out "Suddenly, Seymour," the kind of show-stopping tune that you find yourself singing days afterward.

Unfortunately, there aren't any other songs so likely to linger in the memory. In fact, the poor quality of the music provides one of the major contrasts between this film and one otherwise similar to it, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The songs in *Little Shop* offer extremely clever lyrics but merely adequate tunes. In *Rocky Horror*, with its foot-stomping rock-and-roll score, it's the other way around.

In most respects, the resemblance between the two movies

is striking, sometimes uncomfortably so, right down to the opening chords, the portentous narration, and the spooky flashes of lightening. Both are based on long-running stage shows—on sci-fi musical comedies, in fact (something of a specialized genre). Both films offer us nerdy, naive heroes and sexy but square heroines, though the two in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have a bit more spunk than the comic-book nebbishes of *Little Shop*. Both films wax nostalgic with a campy wink, the one with its references to Ann Miller and Fay Wray, the other with allusions to Jack Paar, Hedy Lamarr, and Donna Reed. (These are fine for the off-Broadway crowd, but I wonder how many in today's thirteen-and-under movie audiences will get them.) And when *Little Shop*'s monstrous flytrap, "Audrey II," sings about how it's just "a mean green mother from outer space," one almost expects the leaves to peel back and reveal a smirking Tim Curry.

Finally, *Rocky Horror* fans will find something familiar in Steve Martin's gleefully sadistic dentist. (His scenes are a bit overdone, though I couldn't help admiring the gleaming array of fiendishly inventive dental instruments he employs on his horrified patients.) Like the character played by Meatloaf in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Martin rides a motorcycle, dresses in tough-guy gear, makes the same Elvis-like gestures when he's singing, and even wears the same expression in close-ups—sort of a rebellious snarl. His performance could almost be a *Saturday Night Live* imitation.

*Little Shop* may also have a spiritual ancestor in still another horror musical, Brian DePalma's underrated 1974 *Phantom of the Paradise*. ("Underrated," incidentally, is a pompous way of saying that I liked it but most people don't.) Like *Little Shop*, *Phantom*, too, plays variations on a modern-day Faust theme, and a couple of its songs sound as if they might just as easily have been crooned by the seductively menacing plant. I've always been puzzled why *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has gained such celebrated cult status, while *Phantom*, with its gothic rock trappings and eminently hummable tunes, is all but forgotten. Perhaps it's just the vicissitudes of marketing.

*The Little Shop of Horrors* has all the marketing on its side. Far from seeking a midnight cult audience, the sort of pea-brained misfits who enjoy attending movies wearing home-made costumes and screaming their heads off, *Little Shop* sports a big thirty-million-dollar budget, a roster of stars from *Saturday Night Live*

million-dollar budget, a roster of stars from *Saturday Night Live* and *SCTV*, and breathtaking special effects from Lyle Conway and director Frank Oz. For all the thinness of its characters, I expect audiences will love it—though I doubt they'll be dressing up like "Audrey II" and shouting back at the screen.

But why in the world am I making these predictions? By the time you read this, publishing schedules being what they are, *The Little Shop of Horrors* will already be yesterday's news. Chances are you've seen it by now anyway, perhaps even two or three times. It's that kind of movie.



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